Hearth Stories

Issue One, Winter Solstice 2023

Hearth Stories

Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

Welcome to *Hearth Stories*! This first issue is the culmination of months of work, and I am really happy to see it take shape. We have ten really wonderful stories for you ranging in subject matter from witches and forest spirits to terraformed planets and magical buildings, tiny folk to avian tea shops. We hope you will fall in love with the stories as much as we have.

Hearth Stories is being run as a non-commercial magazine. At present the plan is to release two issues a year on the winter and summer solstices. We pay our authors—less than we'd like, but what we can afford—and opperate at a permanent loss. We do not want nor ask for donations or remuneration of any kind. Instead, we'd love if you passed the file or a link to it on to someone else that might enjoy it. It is free to copy and distribute so long as you copy and distribute the whole thing as a unit (do not separate out individual stories, which are all © by their original authors).

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—Sloum, Editor

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Perfect Weather

By Sarah Jackson

Sunday. More than that; Midsummer's Sunday. Festival Day. Make it clear as glass, and bright as a penny. One of those days where you look up and feel giddy, as if you might fall upwards into all that blue. A sky full of hope. A day when anything's possible.

Meg stood in her doorway wearing a satisfied smile as she looked up, over the neat slate roofs of the narrow cobbled street. Neighbours passed her door and raised their hats. "Beautiful morning," they said, and "You've done it again, Meg," and "Real festival weather!" She thanked them, beaming.

Meg wondered sometimes if the town still needed a weather witch. As a girl she'd watched the shire horses raking their plough across the fields. When the crops were sown her mother would bless them, protect them, and ensure a good harvest. Now the horses had been replaced with bright red tractors, but

each year she walked around every farm and said the words over the seeds. Otherwise she lived quietly, kept the worst storms away, and made sure that every year at Midsummer they had one perfect day for the town festival.

Some years she could give them the whole holiday week. This year was a fair one; it would be clear blue air and crisp gold light until a stubborn squall on Thursday which she hadn't managed to untangle.

She glanced up the street and spotted her friend Tam's tawny-brown face and cap of black hair. They were already in their silver costume, but Meg could see at once that something wasn't right; the usual bounce in their step was gone. She lifted her hand in a wave, then ducked inside to make some tea, readying herself for bad news.

"I'm fine. Really," Tam said, as they sat at Meg's kitchen table and traced the wood grain with their thumbnail, silver papier-mâché crown set down beside them. "I'm glad she said something. It can't have been easy. It's better this way. Better to know now that we're not suited." They looked up and their smile shivered like light on dark water. "I mean, what if we had gone ahead with the wedding? Much worse to find out after we've fed the whole town." They gave a brittle laugh, and Meg's heart ached for her friend. She knew how Tam would weave jokes through their pain to disguise it, even from themselves.

"You know, you don't have to be brave with me," she said gently.

"I know," they said. "But it's not the time for tears now, is it?" They looked at the clock on the wall. "Are you ready?"

"Well ... As much as I ever am."

"Again? Really?" Tam stood up, their sparkling jerkin rustling, and wedged their crown firmly on their head. "You'll be fine. You're a wonderful Rose. You're my favourite Rose. Now let's get, before the Green Lads come knocking."

Meg stood up too, swaying with the unfamiliar weight and movement of her dress, skirt heavy with a patchwork of frayed, leaf-shaped scraps in black and green. As Tam opened the door, she adjusted the pink and red-tinged bodice, and picked up her own hat–the ruffles of peachy fabric drooping slightly–and pinned it to her hair before following Tam out into the morning.

It was still cool, but the June light was gathering warmth. They stood for a moment drinking it in, along with the scent of new cut grass and freshly baked honey cake floating out from someone's kitchen window. The sky soared above them. Tam sighed.

"It's gorgeous, Meg. Even better than last year."

"Oh, thank you. I wanted the day to feel ..." She searched for the right words. "Full of promise."

They grinned. "You're an artist. I've never known a weather witch to care so much about how it feels for us poor souls walking around in her creation."

"I'm sorry it's not more fitting for the ones walking around with a sore heart," Meg ventured.

Tam gave a flat laugh. "My heart can wait," they said, with a tinge of irritation, and changed the subject, again: "Let's get down to the square."

Meg nodded. There was a slight hardness in the silence between them as they walked down the hill together, but she soon felt it soften. Every house was dressed in its June finery, decked with branches of leaves and woven grass, sparkled with flowers. On the air they heard voices and murmurs, an occasional exploratory thud from the drum or a phrase whispered by a flute, as the band prepared to make a holy racket.

As they walked, people began to join them, shaking their hands, patting them warmly on the shoulder. Old folks and tiny children waved down from upstairs windows and Meg waved back. It was the town tradition that the weather witch took a part in the procession, but even though Meg had been the Rose for the last four years, and the Earth's Bounty for two years before that, and a Green Lad every year when she was little, she was still nervous. This bit, though, she liked. Even in their tatty old costumes, the way their neighbour's faces lit up when they walked past was a joy for her.

Two fellow players appeared from a side street and joined them; Jero's round pink face bursting cheerfully from the throat of his scowling purple costume and Seftil dressed in layers of shredded silk and lace and fancy stuff, all in shades of sea white and blue.

The air was full of excitement and anticipation, fresh as a peppermint. But as Meg watched Tam joking and smiling–hiding–she wished there was something she could do to help them. As they turned into the square they saw the rest of the town gathered, some in costumes, some in their best clothes, some half-hidden by branches and bundles of grass. The Green Lads–the town children, in green jerkins and breeches, faces and hair daubed green–ran over to them, and raced around them in a circle chanting "Come-o come-o, the Sun she will not wait-o, we are the Green Lads, we're here to fetch you hither-o!"

"Ah! Here's our Erl King and our Ocean," said Garw, the town librarian, in his costume as the Wise Oak. "And our Rose and our Moon Prince." The last he said softly and Meg knew that the news had travelled. She glanced at Tam who smiled harder than ever.

"Thinking of starting without us, were you?" they said. "Where's ... Where's the Sun?" they asked, and it cut across the murmur of conversation like a branch cracking.

"Here," Ana said, and stepped out of the town hall doorway, golden dress blazing in the blue June sun. Her red hair glowed like a crown of fire, brighter than the gold paper diadem which nestled there. She looked sadly at Tam, who dropped their eyes but kept smiling, awkward and pained. The players stood in silence, and Garw coughed.

Without meeting her eyes, Tam offered Ana their arm, which she took, and silent relief passed through

the crowd which now filled the square, as their Moon and Sun were united for one last time.

The other players arranged themselves in position. Celestial figures in the lead, then the Rose and the Wise Oak, then the Ocean, and schoolteacher Bel dressed as Earth's Bounty (a cumbersome costume covered in papier-mâché apples). At the rear was Jero as the Erl King, now wearing his correct, sinister face, and around them all the Green Lads, ready to scamper and cartwheel and plunge into the crowd, knocking people's hats off their heads and seizing flowers from people's hands to throw in the air.

Meg watched as Ana bent her freckled neck and sought Tam's black eyes. "Are you all right?" she asked, under her breath.

"I'm fine," Tam hissed, then looked shocked at the force of it. "Well, you know," they said, sadly. "But we've got a job to do today. Tomorrow, we'll see."

In that moment, Meg had an idea. She almost missed her cue as the big drum was struck and the whistles blown. The crowd cheered as the characters stepped forward as one, except Meg who stumbled and blushed crimson, quickly correcting her step as the procession swayed down the street in time to the band.

Monday. Make it soft. Make it quiet. Pull downy clouds over our heads like a blanket. Fold us into gentle mist, blur our voices, dull the edges of the day. Let grains of muffled sunlight

fall slow, like sifted sugar, like snow. Give me grey. Give me the in-between, give me the not-quite. Give me a tender place, in which to grieve.

There was a knock at the door and when Meg opened it, Tam was standing there in the drizzle, hair damp and smile heavy. Tears spilled onto their cheeks, and Meg folded them into a hug, squeezing them tight as they cried onto Meg's warm shoulder.

Tam stood back, and wiped their eyes. "Thank you," they whispered. "It's perfect."

Meg smiled. "I'll put the kettle on."

SARAH JACKSON

Sarah Jackson's work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Translunar Travelers Lounge, and Electric Spec. She is editor of Inner Worlds magazine, and delivers friendly and supportive writing workshops. Her website is sarah-i-jackson.ghost.io and you can find her on Mastodon as @sarahijackson@wandering.shop.

Q&A with Sarah Jackson

The following questions were posed by Emily Yu, author of *Every Room Is a Crowded Room*, and are answered by Sarah Jackson about their story *Perfect Weather.*

Can any of the other townspeople do magic? What is the origin of the weather witch?

> I don't think so. Maybe a little hedgewitchery and healing. I don't know where the weather witches got their powers but I like the idea of every town having one, like they might have a blacksmith.

How does Meg feel about her abilities? Did she ever struggle controlling the weather, or has she ever made an error where the weather did not turn out as planned?

> I thought of Meg as someone who loves her work, and takes it seriously, but sometimes

dreams of other paths she might have taken. She has certainly struggled, and made plenty of mistakes, the way all craftspeople do! That's how we learn, after all. That doesn't mean she's not embarrassed about them, though.

What is the story that is told in the festival?

I have no idea, I'm afraid! Partly because I'm a lazy worldbuilder, and partly because I like the idea of people filling it in with their imagination.

Are there any specific details or scenes that didn't make it into your final draft that you want to share?

No. Just some more description of the costumes and the sky that were slowing it down and not adding anything. I've saved them in my *nice descriptions* folder for a rainy day.

Sea Cures for the Previously Cursed

Adriana C. Grigore

Old Tillie says—for bad weather doldrums, mix together:

—a drop of basil oil
—2 bay leaves
—tablespoon of lavender syrup
—pinch of poppy seeds
—a cardamom or two
—1 cinnamon stick
—2 mugs of almond milk
—2 cups of water

Bring them to a boil in a copper kettle and steep them well, then pour into cups. Add a generous spoonful of honey to each and sprinkle cinnamon on top. Drink together while still hot.

Unless the clock on the wall was also cursed, Clove had been cleaning this kettle for three quarters

of an hour. That surely was too long to clean a kettle. They should stop. But what if it was still dirty?

It was a muddy weather outside. The shore had disappeared into the fog, the clouds had gathered close and heavy, and now the wind was making the windows sigh. It was cold, and the water on their hands didn't help. One more reason to rinse this kettle once and for all and start using it.

An upstairs door banged closed and Clove winced. Air, wind, drafts, the storm outside. A pattering of steps on the stairs.

"Clove? Have they come back yet?"

"Not yet."

Alma jumped the last few steps and the sound of her feet hitting the floorboards pulled another wince out of them. "It's getting soggy outside. You can't even see the lighthouse anymore. Do you think they'll be much longer?"

"I don't know."

"What are you making?"

Clove looked down at the suddy kettle and ran cold water over it before they could change their mind. Set it aside on a towel. Wiped their hands on their sweater. "Nothing."

"Oh, is that Tillie's recipe? Hers were the best! I'm glad she's feeling better, but I do Miss her tea and biscuits and soup and ... do you think she'll visit us?"

"I don't know ... maybe."

"I want to show her that I can *stomp* now. No glass shards under my feet this time!" she said with that nervous energy that sometimes made Clove feel better about not being able to push words out right

either, then she did stomp—and immediately yelped and leaned down to pluck a shard out of her foot. It dissolved in the air, but the blood on her flowery sock remained. "Uf, nevermind, still gotta work on that."

Clove didn't realise they'd started gathering ingredients until there was no more space on the countertop. They eyed the small glass bottle of oil in their hand with a modicum of mistrust, added a drop to the drying kettle.

"Do you want help?"

Great as the temptation to return to their room and disappear for a while was, Clove shook their head. "I'm fine, but ... space?"

"Oh, right, sorry," she said, taking a few steps back like it wasn't a problem. "I'll see what the others are up to. Maybe shingles will start falling off the roof!"

"Please don't say that ..."

Her grin widened even more, and she skipped back upstairs, leaving faint bloody footprints in her wake.

Which left Clove staring at this damn kettle again. The bay leaves were in, though they had no recollection of doing that, so they measured a single tablespoon of syrup. It shook more than a bit in their hand, so they added more than needed, but they tried not to focus on that either.

They spilled poppy seeds everywhere when the front door banged open and Miss Scope stepped in, wind-blown and frayed. "Goodness, it's really kicking up a storm outside. Oh, Clove, how nice to see you out of your room! How are you?"

Trying hard not to grit their teeth. "Fine, thank you."

"I'll be leaving for the day, see if I can outrun the rain back to town. Do any of you need anything I could bring tomorrow?"

Clove shrugged, a ruffling of non-existent feathers as they gathered poppy seeds one fingertip at a time.

"Alright, then I'll be off!" And she almost was, door creaked open and the salty wind mewling its way in and pushing Clove's poppy seeds all over, but then she turned around. "Alain and Senna got back, right? They told me they wanted to pop down to the shops."

"Not yet."

"Still! Oh, I do hope this rain doesn't catch them. It looks fierce. Maybe I should take the car and meet them halfway ..."

Both of them would've hated that. "No, they ... they must be close. It's fine."

"You think so?"

Clove made themself nod. Alain had been saying he wanted some time away from the house, and after all that time dancing under a hill, Senna didn't like being cooped up either. It was unfair to take that from them just because anxiety was gnawing away at Clove's internal organs.

"Alright," miss Scope finally acquiesced. "But contact me if they're not back in the next half hour, okay?"

Another nod made her go at last, taking the wind with her. Clove sagged, in relief and nausea alike. This all could've been avoided if they'd stayed in their

room. They would've wrapped themself in a blanket and sat themself on the windowsill that really didn't want to be a window seat, and watched the storm brew over the shore. Counted the seconds between each lightning and thunder, and listened only distantly to the murmur of voices coming from downstairs. Familiar. Safe.

They reached for the cinnamon just as the stairs creaked once more, with several sets of feet now. Alma was in the middle of a story about sunken ships, with Otto and Nell quipping behind her, but she softened her voice upon reaching the end of the stairs.

"Clove? We're gonna sit down here for a while, it's really loud upstairs. Is that okay?"

Clove shrugged. Then remembered it was a habit they were trying to break, and added, "Alright."

"What are you doing?" Nell asked, twisting the stem of a leaf sprouting out of her index finger, band-aid at the ready for when it broke off.

"They're making us tea," Alma said, and led them to the fireplace.

Clove rechecked the recipe without taking any of it in as they kept stealing glimpses out the corner of their eye.

Alma sat cross-legged in one of the armchairs, a clean pair of socks on her feet now. She'd picked up her story again, though she barely managed to go through half a sentence without someone adding something of their own to it. But she seemed to like that.

Nell said something and Otto collapsed into a fit of laughter that ended with him choking and coughing half a dozen pearls in his lap. When Alma muttered something with a smirk, he spat a rose petal her way, which caused the laughter to pick back up.

The cardamom was in a small paper bag at the very back of the topmost shelf. To reach it, Clove balanced quietly on a chair, imagining their bones were not hollowing out at the promise of height, and feeling once again like the only stranger among a close-knit family. Which was nonsense. They weren't a family. They were just some people hanging around at a seaside resort, dealing with the aftermaths of their disenchantments. The only thing they had in common was their bad luck with magic and being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The chair clattered when they got down, but nobody seemed to notice over the growing din of the storm. Clove let out a sigh of relief and added the cardamom and a few tablespoons of water, then set the kettle over a small flame and pleaded with it not to burn while they dredged out the milk.

Thunder shook the windows, and Clove thought of the embrace of a tree's canopy, loud and swaying as they waited out storm after storm, the wind running through their feathers as through leaves. They shook the memory off with guilt coating their mouth, thinking of Nell and her three years of being locked inside an ash tree, not an embrace, but a coffin.

Any of the counsellors would've said something like, "Someone else's experience doesn't negate your

own", but maybe it should have. Maybe, sometimes, it should have. They added a cup of milk, a cup of water.

It was only when the kettle started bubbling that the front door burst open and Alain and Senna came rushing inside. Laughing, hair stuck to their temples, bags sheltered under feeble raincoats.

"What took you so long?" Otto jumped out of the armchair to help them unload their wares.

"Oh, it was a market day!" Alain said, shaking the rain out of his hair.

"It got the better of us," Senna added and plopped her bag down with a heavy thud. "Barely even noticed the clouds. Alright, see what we brought, I'll die if I don't change right this second."

She bounded upstairs, leaving Alma, Nell and Otto to dig through various trinkets and games while Alain filled the coffee table with colourful boxes of biscuits and nutty toffees. Clove watched him arrange all of them in immaculate order, then grimace and push them around a bit more haphazardly.

They barely remembered to add the rest of the milk and water in time, and the kettle sizzled with it loudly enough that they winced. But at least it smelled nice, they thought. Underneath the faint whiff of burnt milk.

And when they looked up again, Alain was beside them, a tentative smile on his wind-beaten face. "Hey."

In an attempt to meet his gaze, because that was something else they'd been working on, Clove glanced at the dark circles under his eyes, which they

knew matched their own. Not that they'd checked, mirrors being a rather sore subject in this house, but because they kept finding each other awake most nights.

Sometimes, it was Clove perched on the roof outside the attic window, hating the height and the wind and everything, but missing the familiarity of it nonetheless. Other times, Alain pacing the resort, gathering dust with his fingertips and twitching every time sand crunched under his steps, like there was still a witch over his shoulder, urging him to clean, clean, clean in perpetuity. It was easier to keep it at bay if they sat together and talked till morning light.

So that was just something they did. Clove, trying not to turn back into a sparrow, and Alain, trying not to scrub the whole house clean three times a night.

And now, Alain did not say "you're out of your room", and he did not say "isn't it better down here", and he did not say "don't you wanna sit and chat with the others". What he said was, "I got you something."

He dug into his pockets as Clove stirred the kettle distractedly, and handed them a ceramic figurine shaped not like a bird, no, never that, but like a small fish, scales melting from cerulean to lilac.

"It's silly, but I saw it and it made me think of you, so I got it." He came round to look at the ingredients they'd gathered around them, picked up a few remnant poppy seeds, then thought better of it and dropped them on the floor. "What are you making?"

Clove closed their fingers around it and around the feeling that threatened to spill out of them and pointed at the handwritten cookbook propped against a teapot. "Something Tillie used to make us. Thought I could ... dunno."

"It smells nice," Alain said. "Can I help?"

And Clove knew they could've said no and he would have taken no more offence than Alma did, but at the same time, they felt very warm right now. "Could you, um ... gather some cups?"

"On it."

In retrospect, they probably over-brewed it. But there was nothing in it making it bitter, was there? They hoped not. They took the kettle off the flame just as Alain set six flowery cups in a perfect row and held up a strainer.

Steam rose white and sweet in the air as they poured, and there were some distant murmurs coming from the other room, but Clove focused on adding equal teaspoons of honey and sprinkling just enough cinnamon over each cup. No use going to all this trouble if they ruined it now.

Alain ducked down to unearth a round tray from the back of a dusty cupboard, then watched them quietly for a moment, before he gathered a pinch of cinnamon in his palm and blew on it. Which got it everywhere, cups and countertop and stove and Clove's face alike, but it did allow them to stop fiddling.

"Sorry," he said, expression strained. "You looked a bit stressed."

"Don't I always?" Clove retorted and marvelled at themself for doing so. But it did make him laugh, and they knew it pained him to make a mess on purpose, so they felt even warmer. "Should we, uh ...?"

They loaded the tray together, cups tinkling together in an imperfect circle, and then Clove finally found themself out of the dim shelter of the kitchen and into the bright light of the living room.

And everyone was here. Senna, changed into something light and comfortable, Nell, bandaged fingers working at a wooden puzzle, Otto, picking raisins out of biscuits, and Alma, socks dusted pink now, but still grinning widely when she caught sight of them. And none of them said anything about this being the first time Clove had actually joined them down here either, which they guessed was something else they had in common. The understanding that everyone went at their own pace.

"Gods, Clove, this tastes just like Tillie's," Otto sighed after the first sip, which was very nice of him. Clove could still taste a bit of burnt milk.

"I always thought it was magic when she made it." Senna squinted at them over the rim of her cup. "Are you magic, Clove?"

Clove attempted a shaky smile. "Not recently, no."

They all snorted, for wasn't that the goal indeed? Alain looked at them and took a sip too, then pressed a smile against the side of his cup, like a secret. And it was like Clove had a bird heart in their chest again, but only for a moment, before it got heavy and full again.

Then Senna urged Alma to tell them another one of her stories, and she beamed at the attention and did just that. She filled the room with pirate ships and underwater treasures and glowing caves and not a bit of magic, until the storm outside was just a soggy afterthought. Their cups emptied between bouts of thunder and horrified laughter.

And maybe, for a couple hours, Clove didn't feel like an outsider at all, and their bones didn't feel hollow. So perhaps old Tillie knew some magic after all.

ADRIANA C. GRIGORE

Adriana C. Grigore is a writer from the windswept plains of Romania. They have a degree in language and literature, a penchant for folklore, and a tendency to overwater houseplants. You can find their fiction in *Clarkesworld*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and others.

Q&A with Adriana C. Grigore

The following questions were posed by Katherine B. Randall, author of *Primeval*, and are answered by Adriana C. Grigore about their story *Sea Cures for the Previously Cursed.*

Thank you for the sneak peek at "Sea Cures for the Previously Cursed." I really loved how much you managed to fit into such a small time and space—the length of one recipe.

Thank you!

In "Sea Cures for the Previously Cursed," hints come through of the type of curses that the characters were under before the story starts. How did you decide how much of the past to reveal, and when?

Since everyone had a pretty limited page-time, I tried to convey something of their personality and their curse whenever I introduced a new character, and keep these pretty much separate.

I wanted to show that their afflictions had coloured the way they behave now, but that they didn't become their whole personality.

Most of the curses I've used are either from fairly well-known tales (see next question) or pretty straight-forward. My short stories tend to be rather long, so keeping this one so compact was a challenge I quite enjoyed, but I probably would've had a harder time without all this pre-established lore.

What inspired this story? What other fairy tales are behind it, and why did they speak to you?

I tend to gravitate towards narratives about people living with curses or some other kind of chronic trouble, so this story came rather easily. I wanted to conjure this period of calm that comes after "the worst has passed," where things aren't yet okay, but you know they will be.

Alma walking on glass shards is, of course, based on my favourite detail from "The Little Mermaid" growing up. Otto spitting pearls and petals came from my partial remembrance of "Diamonds and Toads" (technically, his curse was the reward, but I could never imagine spitting roses as anything but a punishment). Alain's is inspired by Cinderella and several other fairy tales in the same vein, and Senna, Nell, and Clove have been touched by various fairy ballads or tropes.

As I was reading Clove's thoughts and feelings, I found myself thinking of real-world parallels to what they (and other characters) were experiencing. I loved that the story ended on a hopeful note. What do you see for their future? Or is that up to the reader's imagination?

> I always prefer to leave it to the reader's imagination once I've sent a story out in the world. But I like to think that they all had plenty more cups of warm drinks, and sunny days, and that maybe one day Clove went for a walk on the beach and didn't float away even once.

Scilla and the Brightwood

By Em Harriett

The Brightwood was dark.

That was the first thing Scilla noticed when she ventured to the lookout point at the edge of the village: that the Brightwood, its subtle glow a longtime beacon, had gone out. Across the prairie, the line of trees was a dark slice across the even darker sky, a starless void where there had once been light.

Scilla balanced on the wooden fence marking the boundary between her village and the wide prairie. At nine and a half years old, Scilla had the long tufted ears of her kind, the Luminen, as well as thickened callouses on her three fingers. Short chestnut hairs covered her skin and rippled as she shivered.

"Why's it dark?" she wondered, copper eyes trained on that streak of shadow. "It's never gone out completely before. Is it sick?"

"Priscilla!"

Scilla yelped as her mother, Elowen, plucked her effortlessly from the fence.

"We do *not* go near the Brightwood anymore, you understand?" Elowen chastised as she set her daughter down on her own two feet. "Ever since that poison took root, it's dangerous to go inside—*especially* for someone without a lumen."

"Yes, Mother," said Scilla. "But if I summoned my own lumen I could go, right?"

Elowen pinched the wide bridge of her nose, ears drooping. Her lumen, a softly glowing orb of light, bobbed by her long ringlet curls like a second parent. Behind her coreopsis-dyed orange robes and ringlet curls, the village glowed with lantern-light and lumens alike as other Luminen went about their business—but Scilla could see the nervous glances they shot at the Brightwood, how their ears turned down and their hands fidgeted as if the deep black sky would swallow them whole without the light to keep it at bay. Even their lumens struggled to stay aglow.

Scilla's mother smiled wearily and offered Scilla her hand.

"Come along home," she said. "I'll fix us both tea and porridge. Put that Brightwood business out of your mind for now; let the adults handle it."

Scilla chewed the inside of her cheek. She was young, sure, but that didn't mean she was insignificant—and the Brightwood had been a part of her peoples' lives for as long as anyone could remember.

"But something's happened to it", she thought, glancing again at the patch of preternatural darkness on the horizon. "Something bad ..."

"Scilla?"

"Coming, Mother."

Hand in hand, Scilla walked with Elowen back to their adobe home.

But the Brightwood's gloom spread across the back of Scilla's mind like an ink stain.

Elowen ladled porridge into two bowls and set them on the table, making no move to join Scilla and eat. Her lumen followed her around, fading and glowing in tune to her emotions. In its light, the worry lines etched in Elowen's forehead were fine-bladed prairie grasses.

Scilla stirred her porridge idly. "Why's it so bad that the Brightwood's dark?" she asked.

Her mother shook her head. Her own short fur was a deeper shade of brown, and in the firelight from the hearth it gleamed bronze.

"Scilla, this isn't a good time," Elowen started.

"But it's *bad*, isn't it."

Elowen wrung her hands nervously, all three fingers clasped like tree roots. Her ears flicked up and down nervously.

"Please don't be scared," she said. "But a poison is polluting the biggest tree in the Brightwood. If the forest fails to light again, we—our entire village—will all need to relocate."

Scilla's breath caught in her throat. "What? Why?" she asked.

Her mother sighed. She sat down, letting her long hair flow down her back, the slope of her nose bridge pronounced against the lumen beside her. Her tufted ears were lowered, despondence dragging the tips earthward.

"Light is more than what we see by; it is our life-force," said Elowen. "Our lumens are produced from our own essence when we are old enough to look inward. They light our path and give us the means to see when all else fails. The Brightwood's glow, day and night, helps our people function—it lights our entire area, the part of the world here that we call our own. We're so far from the sun; we get no other light aside from those woods and what we make ourselves with our lumens and lanterns. If our Brightwood dies for good, well ..."

Elowen sighed again, shaking her head sadly.

"I know other luminous woods exist beyond the prairie," she added. "We will survive. It won't be the same, but it's better than wasting away in near-total darkness."

Scilla's mouth dried as the implications of her mother's words set in. Elowen kept talking, but Scilla wasn't listening, her mind spinning with the idea of having to leave everything she knew and loved here behind. Something burned in her chest.

Scilla ate her porridge, the grains tasteless on her tongue.

That night, Scilla couldn't sleep.

Anxiety snagged her heart and quickened her pulse, made her grasp her woven blankets tightly as if she could shield herself from the world past her open window.

Endless night. A sky without a beacon.

"That's it", Scilla thought, frowning. "I can't sit here and do nothing."

Across from her in her own hammock of blankets, Scilla's mother slept soundly, though her dim lumen highlighted the stress marks creasing her brow. Judging from the snores that filled their shared bedroom, Elowen was fast asleep.

Scilla sat up and tip-toed from the bedroom to the kitchen. She didn't have a lumen yet, but she'd seen other classmates in school with the soft glowing orbs before, so it wasn't entirely out of the question that she could summon one at her age.

There was a brightness in her, too, if only she reached for it.

Scilla inhaled, nostrils flaring with the effort. Gently, she pressed her fingers to her sternum, feeling the hard breastbone for a hint of fluttery softness.

"Look inward", she thought, "that's what every adult says you have to do to summon your lumen. Let's see ..."

She closed her eyes and searched inside herself for that spark, for the shine of her own soul among the branches of her body. Somewhere in her was the part of her that made her Luminen.

"My name is Priscilla Alyeh. I am small but not powerless. And I want to light the Brightwood up again so no one has to move away."

Something warmed under her skin.

Scilla exhaled. The lumen formed in her fingertips first, and as she drew her hands away from her chest it coalesced into a small glowing ball about the size of a small melon.

Scilla grinned involuntarily. She had half a mind to wake her mother and show off her achievement—but her self-appointed mission pressed at her mind.

She looked out the kitchen window at the inky line on the horizon against the starry sky. Her lumen lit her face in earthen tones; its warmth filled her from crown to toe.

"I'm coming", she thought, copper eyes trained on the Brightwood.

The Brightwood loomed somber and sepulchral as Scilla stood at its boundary. She'd crossed the prairie easily enough—the tall grass drifted around her hips without restraint, and her sturdy boots made the walk bearable on her small feet. Her lumen bobbed by her shoulder, lighting up Scilla's face and wavy hair, but against the immense blackness of the forest it suddenly seemed so small, so inconsequential.

"Can I really do this?" Scilla thought. "The Brightwood's *huge*. Mother said there's a poison in it, but what if it's spread too far? What if I really can't fix it?"

Her lumen dimmed. Scilla gasped and cupped it in her hands, chasing away the anxieties until it returned to its gentle yellow-white glow.

"No time for second-guessing," she told it. "We'll do this. I have to believe we can!"

The lumen brightened like a new star. Scilla squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, gazing up at the inky boughs.

She plunged into the blackness.

With her lumen lighting the way, Scilla avoided twisting her ankle on misshapen roots and burrows, but her light only extended so far—anything more than a few feet away was a wall of shadow.

Scilla cupped her three fingers around her lumen, cradling it carefully as she trekked, scanning the shadows with copper eyes for the biggest tree in the forest. The trouble was, being nine and a half made *every* tree appear larger than life—time after time, Scilla thought she'd found the Brightwood's center, only to discover an even *larger* tree growing next to it.

Deep into her search, Scilla followed a narrow path sharply downward, dislodging pebbles and dead leaves—

She stopped short. At the edge of her lumen's halo of light, a pack of five dog-sized creatures crouched as if waiting for prey to stumble into their jaws. Razor-like fins trailed along their smooth backs, their wide mouths crowded with sewing-needle teeth.

Each crouched on six legs and lashed a sinuous tail, predatory eyes gleaming at Scilla like she was their next meal. From the light of Scilla's lumen, the beasts' skin was dull, metallic pewter.

Night-beasts, Scilla decided to call them. "They look like the chunks of iron that Mother's friend claims fell from the sky."

Scilla gulped, her mouth dry. Slowly, she retreated up the slope, struggling to place her boots behind her without taking her eyes off the creatures. Her tufted ears flattened against her skull.

The night-beasts' leader snarled.

One by one, the five creatures rose and advanced, clawed feet easily gripping the stones and roots that covered the path. Just as Scilla bumped into a tree trunk, the lead creature pounced.

Scilla yelped and ducked under a bough as the night-beast raked its claws where she'd been standing. Without waiting to see what it would do next, Scilla bolted, scrambling over roots and kicking up dead leaves in her haste. She cradled her flickering lumen against her chest, afraid to let it leave her hand lest it drift behind and become night-beast prey.

Her long ears swiveled, catching the scrape of claws and heavy breathing behind her. Her lungs burned. Her lumen dimmed as she pressed it against her chest.

One of the night-beasts snagged the back of Scilla's tunic in its needle teeth.

Scilla almost toppled backward from the force. Pivoting on one foot, she yanked her tunic out of the creature's jaws, ripping the madder-root pink fabric.

Two other night-beasts lunged from the darkness, but as soon as their metallic hides passed into the light of Scilla's lumen she jumped back, able to see them.

Scilla kicked a spray of dead leaves up into the beasts' faces and sprinted deeper into the Brightwood. She scrambled over rocks and roots, leapt over creeks that babbled black water in the night, pushed past overgrown ferns and pale purple fronds.

The night-beasts howled. Scilla set her jaw firm.

"You won't catch me so easily", she thought, nose scrunching in determination. "I have to get to the heart of the Brightwood—and a bunch of scary monsters won't stop me!"

Her lumen brightened. Scilla bounded onto a thick tree root coated in white lichen and jumped down the other side, swiveling to get into a narrow crevice underneath the root. Bundling her lumen in the unshredded half of her tunic, she curled her body over the light, bracing herself against the darkness.

Blackness surrounded her. The Brightwood creaked and groaned in all of its tree trunks. Wind rattled the branches; claws scraped the rough bark, the sharp sound getting closer and closer—

Scilla curled into a tight ball and screwed her eyes shut as the night-beasts came. The creatures yipped and howled as they vaulted over the thick root and continued their mad chase into the dark, the sounds of their own pursuit swallowing the lost sound of their supposed prey.

Scilla held one hand over her mouth, calloused pads pressing against her lips, struggling to keep her

breath from betraying her location. Her chest tightened as her lumen struggled to shine.

Only when she was certain the night-beasts were gone did Scilla unfold herself from under the giant root. She unfurled her lumen from her ripped tunic and let out a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry", she thought, letting the light orb rest in her palm. Her chest relaxed as the light brushed her chestnut fur. "Let's keep going. The center of the Brightwood has to be around here somewhere—I feel like I've run across the prairie and back by now!"

Scilla hauled herself up onto the thick root that had saved her and followed it, able to walk atop it like it was a road back in the village, slowly angling upward as the root took her to its source.

When she reached the bark of a giant tree, Scilla had to stop and gape.

The thickest tree in the Brightwood was split down its center like lightning had gouged it nearly in two. Its white bark was ash-pale and mottled with silver; the metallic flecks caught the pale light of Scilla's lumen like glittering stars, the lightness among the deep black of space.

Oozing from the cavity was a purple sap so dark it was almost black in the shadow of night.

"That's where you're hurting", Scilla thought with a pang. Mother said something about poison. "There has to be a way to get that gunk out of you ..."

Scilla climbed up knots in the trunk until she got to the cavity high above the roots. She braced her feet on two separate knots, careful not to touch the poison rimming the edges of the cavity.

Scilla cradled the lumen in both hands. Her knees shook, but under the lumen's warmth, her hands were steady.

"This is my lumen," she whispered, hoping the tree could hear her and not the night-beasts elsewhere in the woods. "It's part of me, just like every Luminen's one is a part of them. But the light we have inside us needs *your* light to keep us shining, too. Mother says to leave it to the adults. But I came all this way myself, escaped those skittering night-beasts, and I *know* I can do something about this icky poison. Watch!"

She raised her hands, letting her lumen rise past her fingertips, its bold light glowing brighter and brighter with Scilla's own confidence. Wherever the light shone, the poison hissed like acid burning through metal and evaporated. Scilla peered inside the cavity itself and nearly gagged.

"There's more inside", she realized, coughing as the acrid smell reached her nose. "The Brightwood's not healed until I get all the poison out."

Scilla knelt on the lip of the cavity and leaned inside, her lumen radiant in the enclosed space. Dark purple poison clung to the tree's inner lining and hissed like a hunting night-beast.

Scilla's tufted ears pressed against her skull. She narrowed her eyes at the poison.

"Get out of our Brightwood," Scilla told it.

She thrust her lumen into the cavity.

At once, she felt something poke at her chest, some kind of claw scratching her sternum to get inside—and the feeling frightened her so badly she

nearly fell from the tree. Shuddering, Scilla dug her boots into the bark and leaned in further, the short hairs on her face and exposed arms standing on end.

The cavity grew dim. Scilla's lumen flickered, fading as fear overtook her heart.

It would be *easy* to give up—to withdraw, retrace her steps, and return home before her mother woke and found her missing. It would be easy to let her people pack their things and find a new Brightwood to keep away the gloom of deep space.

Scilla grit her teeth. She glared at the poison with luminous copper eyes.

"No", she told it. "The Brightwood sustains my family, my home, my people, and you will not snuff it out!"

Scilla shoved her palms forward. Her lumen surged with sudden brightness, burning away the poison with sheer conviction.

The tree creaked. Evaporated poison streamed out of its bark, filling the cavity with a deep purple cloud. Scilla coughed, scrambling to turn around so she could face the open air, and managed to seat herself on the lip of the cavity as the poison rushed past her in a gust and disappeared.

Before Scilla could admire her handiwork, a strong glow lit her from behind.

Light bloomed inside the tree, illumining the bark in rings that flowed from its heartwood to its roots and branch-tips, until the entire tree started to shine like a newborn sun.

Scilla had to shut her eyes against it. Her eyelids turned red as she kept them closed—but when the

brightness dimmed, she cracked her eyes open and risked a peek.

Thousands of spores poured from the bark like fireflies. Scilla watched, mouth agape, as the glowing spores billowed in a spiral around the trunk and spread into the forest beyond. Wherever they landed, white light encompassed bough and bush just as it had with the wounded tree, letting it shine before dimming to a pleasant light just like any lumen. Scilla laughed as a few spores landed on her and filled her small body with pure radiance.

More spores streamed from the branches, drifting and dancing through the air to spread to all the corners of the woods. Night still painted the sky ink black. But here, now, the Brightwood was a beacon, a forest once again living up to its name.

Scilla's lumen bobbed by her shoulder. Letting out a content sigh, Scilla crawled inside the tree's cavity, legs crossed and back resting against the bark, watching the light spores dance.

EM HARRIETT

Em Harriett (she/they) is a speculative fiction author from New England whose work is inspired by nature and the magic of the world around them. Her work has also appeared in emharriett.com.

Q&A with Em Harriett

The following questions were posed by Alicia Adams, author of *Dandelion*, and are answered by Em Harriett about their story *Scilla and the Brightwood.*

What I love about "Scilla and the Brightwood" is how unrelentingly positive it is. It's something I noticed in some of your other works as well. Do you set out to write positive fiction? What led you in this direction?

> I gravitate towards writing fiction with hopeful outlooks because it's what I believe in and what I want to impart to anyone who reads my work—that even though there are awful things in the world and struggles, that there is still love and kindness and something to hold on to. That said, I do write darker pieces from time to time as a way to process those emotions or just for the sake of writing something more haunting.

I really love the world you've built for Scilla and Elowen. Do you have more stories based in this world? Do you enjoy world building in general?

> I love world building! As far as short stories are concerned, everything is standalone. I don't write more than one piece in the same world—because if I'm coming up with many different short things in the same setting or with the same character(s), I'd rather flesh it out into something longer.

I see that you write for a wide variety of ages, at least middle grade through adult. Do you have a favorite audience to write for? How do your stories vary based on audience?

> I like writing for YA or middle grade can still have complex themes and narrative but requires a higher suspension of disbelief. It's a fun balance that keeps me engaged no matter what project I'm working on at the time.

I saw on your website that you have *many* long works (multiple series!) in progress in addition to a wide range of shorter pieces. What is your process for managing multiple projects?

> ADHD, and I'm only partly kidding. I naturally want to have several things going at once—many proverbial irons in the fire—so that if I run into a block on one, I can shift gears and tackle a different project. Often, I find that taking a break from one to focus on another allows my

brain to come up with a solution for the first problem, so that when I pivot back to it I can keep going. When it comes to novels, I tend to only focus on one book at a time, though I can drift between series depending on what stage I'm at. As of right now, I'm only actively working on two of the series listed on my site.

How do your many other interests—geology, nature, photography—affect your writing? Do they find their way into your work often?

I'm a huge sucker for mineralogy and structural geology, so I love adding details of specific minerals, rocks, or geological features if I can get away with it. I love incorporating plants, animals, and nature in general into my stories, and I'll research specific plants or animals just for a single detail. For the YA fantasy trilogy I'm writing, I actually have three books on the plants of the region I'm basing the world on just so I can be accurate in my descriptions.

Dandelion

By Alicia Adams

It wouldn't be fair to say that Dandy was small; all of the folk were small. Dandy was about the height of a duck egg when held tall-wise, and that was expected for a girl just coming into adulthood. Dandy walked into the golden sunlight wearing her rattiest dress—a brown shift of repurposed burlap—so that she wouldn't have to worry if it got dirty or damaged. Her dandelion-yellow hair was tied back with a piece of straw. She held a clay bucket full of medicinal ointment in one hand and a clean cloth in the other. Dandy puffed out her cheeks when she was nervous, and that's what she did now—puffed and puffed her cheeks full of air to feel the stretch as her inner cheeks inflated. It was the kind of thing she only did when no one was looking. When other folk were watching, she rubbed her fingernails with the pad of her thumb or twirled her hair—acceptable movements, though sometimes people noticed. She remembered something Clover had said: "If you keep

twirling your hair like that, people are going to think you're flirting with them." The thought made her stomach flutter.

But she walked alone across the meadow, cheeks puffed, with her hands clenched on the bucket handle and the cloth. She savored the soft breeze that cut through the warmth of the day and the low buzzing of insects the size of her head. Just beyond the tall grasses, she could hear splashes and the quack-quack-quacks of the family of ducks.

Dandy peeked through the tall grass. The mother duck stood tall in her white feathers with her fearsome orange beak held high. The three ducklings ran back and forth and flapped their floofy yellow wings. Dandy deflated her cheeks, took a deep breath, and poked her head through the grasses. Mother Duck spotted her and signaled that it was safe to approach. Dandy stepped out using her own body language to show that she was here to help. Communication with other species is nebulous, even for folk who know how. Dandy twirled her hair to calm her nerves.

She held up the bucket and moved toward one of the ducklings. With a few quacks and motions from Mom, the duckling squatted down in the mud. Dandy stroked the duckling's yellow feathers with her fingers and cautiously pressed her face against the soft, warm duckling chest, hearing the low thump of the duckling's heart.

"You look like you're doing well," she said to the duckling. Ducks didn't speak her language, but she

thought they might understand her tone of voice. "I brought you something for your eye."

The day before, Dandy had been sitting on a fallen green leaf, watching the clouds lumber through the blue sky when she'd heard a bellow of fearful quacks. She'd hidden in the tall grass and peeked through. She saw Mama Duck flapping her white wings in panic and one of the young ones with her head in the water trying to splash something off. The duckling turned and shook her head in the air then scraped it on the muddy bank. From where she stood, Dandy saw the wriggling black nub of a leech at the inner edge of the duckling's eye.

Without thinking, she'd run through the grass and grabbed a sharp stick that stuck out of the mud by the pond. She slid the stick along the side of the leech and pushed at its mouth until it let go of the flailing duckling. The slimy leech flopped off the duckling and squirmed against the mud until it found its way back to the pond. Dandy ran back into the grass, panting. She wasn't sure that Mama Duck wouldn't gobble her up right there by the water.

Her dress had been covered with mud, blood, and feathers, and her own mother had screamed when she'd walked through the door of their little home in the inner wall of the barn.

Standing out by the pond again with her tub of ointment, Dandy kept her back away from Mama Duck as she dipped her cloth into the ointment and dabbed at the corner of the duckling's eye. "This will help against infection," she said. "That means it will

help your eye heal and help make sure you don't get sick or more hurt."

Dandy lingered for a moment after she was finished. She stroked the ducklings feathers one more time. "This has been nice," she said. "I'll miss you."

She motioned goodbye to Mama Duck and the other ducklings and backed her way into the tall grass. Then, overwhelmed, she dropped the cloth and bucket, collapsed into a ball, and held her face in her hands.

She heard a rustle of grass. "That was very brave," a voice said. She felt a hand on her back and jumped.

"I didn't mean to scare you," the voice said. Dandy turned and saw Clover standing beside her.

Dandy stared at her, not knowing what to say. Clover was taller than Dandy. Her acorn-brown hair was straight and cut off at the chin. She had a square jaw and freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her brown eyes looked deep into Dandy's. Dandy looked down.

"Are you okay?" Clover said.

Dandy nodded and got to her feet. She hadn't expected to talk to another person. She wasn't prepared. She started twirling her hair. "I'm not flirting with you," she said, dropping her hair and rubbing her nail beds with the pads of her fingers instead. "I just do that with my hair sometimes."

"Oh, okay," Clover said. Clover looked down at her shoes. She was wearing her finest clothes—a moss green top and brown slacks. Dandy didn't know why she would be so dressed up, but she felt incredibly underdressed in her burlap dress. She pulled the straw

hair tie out of her hair and started combing her yellow hair with her fingers.

"I'm okay," Dandy said, delayed. "How long were you watching me?"

Now Clover was silent. Then she said, "A long time. I watched you pull the leech out of the duckling's eye."

"But that was yesterday!" Dandy said, not hiding the surprise in her voice.

"I know. I should have said something. I just—It was incredible the way you pulled out that leech. I wanted to tell you I saw you, but I wasn't brave like you, Dandelion. I didn't run out to help you. I'm sorry for that."

"That's okay," Dandy said. She started twirling her hair in her fingers again. Then she felt her cheeks flush and put her hands back down. "You can call me Dandy, you know."

"Okay." Clover smiled. She reached down past Dandy, picked up the cloth, and put it in the bucket. Then she held the bucket in front of her. "Here, let me carry this for you, Dandy."

Dandy rubbed the big woven fibers of her dress between her fingers as she walked beside Clover back toward the big red barn on the southwest side of the farm.

"I think you've made friends for life with those ducks," Clover said, looking down at Dandy for a moment before facing straight ahead again.

"I don't know," Dandy said. "The whole time I was out there, I was so scared I was going to be duck food."

"I was scared, too. That's why I didn't run out to help. I've never seen anyone do something so heroic before. Ducks can die from leech infestation, you know. You might have saved that little duck's life."

Dandy blushed. Again she didn't know what to say. What do people say when they get compliments? "Thank you," she said, but that didn't seem right.

From the white farmhouse, they heard the creak of the front door and saw the great stretching shadow of the farmers' son. Dandy dropped down behind a rock and pulled Clover down beside her.

The farmers' child ran through the grass. The ground shook with each of his steps. Twigs and leaves crunched beneath the massive soles of his shoes. In the cacophony, Dandy heard the click of stone against stone. She looked at Clover, whose terrified face mirrored her own. The click of stones could only mean one thing—the child was collecting rocks from the meadow. If he picked up the rock they were hiding behind, they'd be exposed. Her heart pounded, and her small body tremored against the stone at her back. It's dangerous for creatures so small to be so scared. Dandy had heard stories of people's hearts beating so fast with fear they finally stopped. The thought made her even more anxious. Beside her, Clover was gasping for air in panic. Dandy could smell the blueberry sweetness of her breath.

The thundering footsteps got closer. Clover put her hand into Dandy's and interlaced their fingers. Dandy could feel Clover's pulse hammering through her warm hand. Sweat commingled in the space between their palms.

A voice boomed from the house, speaking a language they couldn't understand. The rocks tumbled to the grass. Dandy watched a round gray stone roll past them and stop mere inches from their feet. The thunderous footsteps receded, and the farmhouse door slammed shut.

Dandy took deep breaths and tried to slow her pounding heart.

"I'm sorry," Clover said, regaining her breath and taking back her hand. "I didn't mean to grab your hand. I was just scared. I know you don't like me like that."

"I never said that," Dandy said. Her heart was slowing down, back to a safe and steady beat. She grabbed her bucket with the cloth tucked inside. She twirled her hair again. "I just said that twirling my hair doesn't mean I'm flirting. I didn't say I don't like you."

"I just meant, you don't like me *like that.*"

"I know what you meant," Dandy said. She felt her heartbeat quicken again. She couldn't let this moment go. Clover liked her because she had been brave, Dandy thought. She could be brave again. Dandy leaned forward and kissed Clover's beautifully freckled cheek. Clover's cheek felt warm and soft under Dandy's lips. She pulled away and saw Clover looking at her, wide-eyed with surprise.

Bravery depleted, Dandy stood up and ran as fast as she could toward the big red barn, where she lived with her family, leaping over pebbles and sticks. As she approached the crack in the sideboard to enter the wall, she looked back. Clover sat against the rock

with one hand against her cheek where Dandy had kissed her. She waved to Dandy with her free hand. Dandy smiled and waved back as she ducked into the wall, feeling dizzy, stroking the sweat on her palm with the pad of her thumb, smelling the sweet blueberry scent of new love.

ALICIA ADAMS

Alicia Adams lives in the woods in California with her spouse, young daughter, and cat. She is currently absorbed in writing stories about tiny people with expansive inner worlds. You can find her through her website at aliciaadamswriting.com or chat with her on Mastodon at @alicia@writing.exchange.

Q&A with Alicia Adams

The following questions were posed by Em Harriett, author of *Scilla and the Brightwood*, and are answered by Alicia Adams about their story *Dandelion*.

Dandy has a lot of physical motions that she seems to rely on when nervous. What calms you down when you're stressed? Do you share any habits with Dandy?

> I'm a big fan of the podcast *Mohanraj and Rosenbaum Are Humans*. In an episode, speculative writer Mary Anne Mohanraj talks about a writing exercise she likes to give students in which (paraphrasing here) you take aspects of your own identity and give them to your characters. I had recently started to notice all of the little self soothing behaviors that I have, and I thought it would be interesting to give a character some of these same behaviors.

> Stimming, in general, is something I don't encounter in reading often.

In Dandy's world, her folk are "the height of a duck egg when held tall-wise," and everything the reader normally perceives as mundane is suddenly much larger—and sometimes a threat. What inspired you to write at this scale? What aspects of world-building from this perspective were easy, and what were challenging?

> I had been in the middle of writing something very dark, and I had sent what I had so far to a critique group. I still wanted to write, but I needed and wanted to take a break from the story I'd been writing. I decided to write something more comforting. I have a four-year-old daughter, and we read lots of books together. I am always so amazed at the joy I can feel after reading an adventure with Frog and Toad, for example, so I decided to write something with small characters. It ended up being a story about anxiety and bravery in the face of physical dangers and then social risk, which can feel even scarier.
>
> I never returned to my darker story. Instead, I've written several interrelated stories about the folk. What I love about the world is how kind everyone is to each other. I enjoy writing about small characters because even just being outside can be an adventure. It was important to me that Dandy was helping the ducks, not just running away from them.

The most difficult parts for me have been the technical details. I don't go into all of the details in the stories themselves, but I have many questions I have to answer for myself. Can the folk make glass? Do they have access to metals? Can they read and write? How can they communicate with folk in other settlements? What do they eat in the winter? In what ways do they form a community? I find questions like these difficult to answer but greatly rewarding.

What writing habits or routines work well for you?

This is always an issue. I work full time and have a young child. I live in an old, creaky house that will groan and complain if I wake up early to write, which will wake up my whole household. Plus, I have a spouse I love who I genuinely want to spend quality time with every day. So, for now, I wake up when the sun comes through the window and lie in bed thinking about a story. I write for half an hour in the mornings and half an hour at night. I meet with the Speculative Literature Foundation (SLF) co-writing group for an hour most Saturdays, and I sometimes get to write while my daughter naps on weekends. Sometimes I listen to rain sounds through headphones to help me focus, and my stories have had more rain in them as a result.

Sometimes I wish I could write more than that, but for this point in my life I'm pretty happy with the time I have.

How do your non-writing interests affect your stories or writing process? Are there aspects of your life that translate to characters, settings, or themes?

> In my previous answer I cite my spouse and daughter as reasons why I can't write all the time. But the truth is that I didn't write as much as I do now before they came into my life. Once all three of us were together, I found that I constantly wanted to write. My partner is my constant collaborator, and my daughter inspires me all the time. A lot of my stories before now have been about parental dread, a deep fear of messing this all up. But I've started prioritizing joy in my stories, and it's helped me in my non-writing life, too.
>
> One thing I've noticed about the media I grew up with is that characters were rarely honest about how they felt. In books and movies and TV shows and plays people always held onto secrets; they didn't say what they were feeling. In RomComs, misunderstandings and withholding information are often a huge part of the plot. I get upset at these kinds of stories now. Over the course of writing this specific set of stories, I wanted my characters to speak up and tell each other how they feel.

What books have you been reading lately that you'd recommend to Hearth Stories readers?

> Oh, goodness. I'm a big reader. I read a lot of science fiction and fantasy, but I haven't found

a lot of books that exactly fit the warm and cozy vibe of *Hearth Stories*. I hope there will be more.

I have a special place in my heart for novellas. You can read them over a long afternoon with blankets and tea, and so they are inherently cozy. Two novellas I can recommend wholeheartedly are *To Be Taught, If Fortunate* by Becky Chambers. Both of these will open up your heart and stay with you long after you read them.

The Scholar of the Journeying Archive

By Catherine Yeates

Emory snapped the book shut with a grimace and pushed it to the corner of the small café table. He took a hearty bite of his croissant followed by a long swig of coffee as he battled the urge to stew over the poor excuse for scholarly writing he'd just finished reading. With a hand over his heart, he inhaled deeply to collect himself. His companion peered at him from the opposite side of the table, grinning as she slipped a thin piece of paper into her own book.

"That bad?" Evangeline asked.

"Deeply mediocre. A fellow in the Department of Historical Spellcraft recommended it. Called it an absolute breakthrough work. In my opinion, the author spent far too many pages extolling the virtues of divination via onions."

She hummed. "When I was a student, I knew a professor who insisted that the branching patterns of broccoli held excellent potential for divination. Even published a paper on it."

"I know the sort. They're usually the same academics who turn up their noses at the idea of speaking with the dead. As if cruciferous vegetables give better answers."

The café door opened, letting in a chill and a wisp of the fog that had yet to vanish in the mid-morning sun. A small crowd entered, their chatter momentarily overwhelming Emory's senses before he recognized them as graduate students from his and Evangeline's home department, Divination and Necromancy.

"Good morning, Professor!" said a woman in a blue dress to Evangeline. She bobbed her head to Emory. "Dr. Ashbrook. Have either of you visited the archive this morning?"

"No," Evangeline said. "Is it in town?"

"Right on this street. I traded for an excellent text on oneiromancy."

"That's wonderful news."

The woman returned to her colleagues, and Emory sent Evangeline a perplexed look. "I don't know any archive or bookshop on this street. Were you speaking of a traveling merchant?"

"Of a sort. The archive visits Port Nassella regularly, though it varies where and when it pops up."

"But what is it? A carriage full of rare books?"

"Far more magical than that."

Outside, the cobblestone street bustled with city dwellers in their finery, most unaware of the addition of a new building. The exterior was unremarkable, made of gray stone with black shingles; he wouldn't

have noticed it, save for the crowd. A line of academics waited outside, carrying books and artifacts as offerings.

"The archive does not sell books; it trades. And I should warn you that it can be particular," Evangeline said. "It seems my students had good luck, so perhaps it is in a pleasant mood."

Emory thought back to his office, where his current academic manuscript lay riddled with ink stains on his desk. It was true he needed additional sources for his methods to avoid being ripped to shreds in peer review again. "Thank you, Evangeline."

He took his place in line and flipped open his messenger bag, sifting through the books he carried with him. He had a well-worn treatise on spell circles along with two unopened texts concerning runic alphabets. And the book he had just finished, of course. Perhaps this archive would appreciate the discussion of plant-based divination methods more than he had.

By the time he reached the door, he was the last one left. The hinges creaked, and a man was spat across the threshold. He had curly white hair and wore a steel gray suit with a thin gold chain of a pocket watch—Emory vaguely remembered him from a lecture he gave on the history of sigil magic.

"Dr. Ashbrook," Reginald said as he dusted himself off. "You're a necromancy expert. Tell me, is it a poltergeist?"

"I've never known a poltergeist capable of moving an entire building."

"Whatever it is, it's in a contemptuous mood today," he said as he hurried away.

The shutters rattled as Emory stepped inside to a musty sitting room filled with books. They lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Stacks blocked the windows, and piles of leather tomes spilled onto the floor, leaving little room to walk. Between the number of doors and the tall staircase leading to the darkness of the second floor, he suspected the archive was larger than it appeared from the outside.

The air rippled, and the walls spoke. "Haven't seen you before. Tell me, what have you brought?"

Emory held out the book. An invisible force snatched it from him, and laughter rang out. "A poor effort. I already possess the first edition, for what little it's worth. Mediocre research and overblown conclusions."

He folded his arms as though that might keep the blush from heating his face. Even if he agreed, he hadn't expected to be laughed at by the building. He changed his approach. "What if I'm not looking to trade for another book? What if I want to learn more about you?"

The archive huffed. "And why would you want to know that?"

"Collegial curiosity. You provide something important to our scholars, but I know nothing about you."

The walls rattled, and the stacks of books seemed to grow taller, looming over him. "If you wish to know about me, you'll have to bring something worth more."

"Worth is subjective. What do you value?"

"Rarities. Curiosities. Books holding more knowledge and wisdom than you're likely to find in all of academia."

"Then I shall try my best," Emory said. "Will you be keeping the book?"

"I suppose," the archive said and tossed it on a nearby stack.

He nodded and opened the front door. "Good day. Until we meet again."

After he left, the archive picked itself up from its foundation. It hovered and then vanished, sending the rest of the buildings flowing neatly back to their original positions.

Emory found himself organizing his office, opening the boxes he hadn't touched since beginning his position at Nassella University over a year ago. He found books on the stars, recent developments in anatomical dissection and tissue preservation, and a dubious tome on divination via anthill. He doubted any of them would impress the archive, which he learned could be expected somewhere in Port Nassella approximately every three weeks.

His personal collection was dominated by reference material as well, though his small apartment held several bookcases of fiction. A blue book caught his eye, and he recognized it as a collection of myths translated from an ancient set of scrolls. Though rather dry, it was the first edition of the translation.

On a clear morning, he spotted the strange gray building sitting along a quiet stretch of river. The area was deserted, and unsure what else to do, he knocked on the door.

"First of the day," the archive said in a cheeky tone. "Show me what you wish to trade."

He withdrew the book from his bag, and the same force grabbed hold of it, flipping through the pages before letting out a dismissive snort. "Really? This translation is rubbish."

Emory forced down the pang of irritation. "And why do you say that?"

"The translator has the context of the work wrong. He calls it a series of myths when it would more accurately be described as a fictionalized grimoire. Each story contains the ingredients and method for a different spell, which he has translated with great inaccuracy."

"Are you a scholar of arcane history?"

"I previously specialized in book restoration. The original scrolls were created when spell books were often presented as fiction to limit the knowledge of magic to a select few."

"Most intriguing."

"It is. However, this translation does no justice to the language nor to the spells themselves. I expect attempting them as they are described would lead to spectacular failure."

"So I might try to teleport myself home and end up fusing with my house instead?"

The archive huffed. "Very funny. I am not suffering from some poorly crafted spell, and neither have I fused with my house."

"Then you don't require any help breaking a curse?"

"I do not. This arrangement suits me well enough for interacting with academics."

Emory reached into his bag and presented a small feather duster with a wooden handle. "If you aren't interested in the book, I also brought this. It's enchanted—noticed you have some cobwebs."

"And what if I like them as they are?"

Emory shrugged. "You don't have to accept it either."

The building rippled, sending a low clatter through the shelves. "Give it here. I'll take the book as well; it should offer me entertainment at least." On the far side of the room, a door creaked open. "You may select anything in there."

He stepped over the books and trinkets on the floor as he entered. This area was even more cramped, and judging by the clutter, he suspected it might be the archive's junk room. Stuffed behind a shelf was a small frame, and Emory wrenched it free. It was a detailed painting of a lake with beautiful cliffs and forests. Carefully rendered sunbeams glittered over the water's surface and cast dappled shadows over the small village.

"I will take this."

"Suit yourself."

"You have a wonderful day," Emory said as he left, and he swore the shutters rattled in laughter.

Over the next week, he passed the painting around the neighboring departments, asking if anyone could identify the location.

"I'm not sure," Evangeline said. "You got this from the archive?"

He nodded. "How long has the building been appearing?"

"Perhaps eight years, I've heard."

"And no one knows who or what it is?"

Evangeline shook her head. "If some eccentric mage is controlling the building, they are dedicated to staying out of sight. Consider the magic the archive uses: portal spells are complex, to say nothing of moving a building." She crossed her arms. "I've heard from colleagues that the archive visits other universities as well, never for more than a day. Apparently, someone tried to pry its inner doors open, but the archive spat him several towns away in irritation."

"I don't blame it," Emory said.

"Nor do I. The archive may be acerbic, but it is patient with the graduate students. It's mostly the, shall we say, *combative* professors the archive dislikes."

The next day, he headed to the Department of Historical Spellcraft to speak with Reginald. The man squinted at the painting with a perplexed expression.

"I believe this depicts a location twenty miles west of here. There is a large lake with a few quaint villages. No major universities, of course." He looked at Emory. "Why are you so curious?"

"I want to know more about the archive," he said simply.

Reginald adjusted his glasses. "I'm not sure it's worth the effort. Whatever it is, it has an unpleasant personality, and I'm not sure it'll take well to someone prying into its business."

"But perhaps it could use a friend."

When the weekend arrived, Emory filled his pack with a change of clothing and tools. He hiked out of the city to a grassy field studded with wildflowers and drew a circle around him with a wave. His magic sparkled in the air, and he set the painting beside a map. He drew the sigils to open the portal at the right location, and then he held his hands out as the magic swelled.

He felt a curious pull between the painting and the map as the spell took hold, opening a swirling portal that grew slowly. Unable to concentrate on both, he focused on the painting. The portal snapped open, and he stepped through. As he exited, all his energy seemed to leave him. He dropped to the ground, catching his breath, and when he stood, he spotted the jagged peaks of tall, snowcapped mountains. A rush of anxiety hit him—he was more than twenty miles from home.

Still, he had arrived, and the lake matched the one in the painting. The village in the distance, however, appeared abandoned, with the buildings barely visible

among the trees. Behind him, houses lay hidden under vines and foliage. As he walked about the town, he heard soft noises in the brush. He spotted a black cat, and then an orange one: dozens of cats watched him with curiosity.

So did a woman. Her gray hair was tied in a bun, and her skin shimmered in the light—a ghost. "I hope you aren't here to hurry me along to the afterlife," she said. "I enjoy taking care of the cats, and they like me."

"No worries. I'm looking for information about a book restorer who might have lived here."

The woman relaxed, and the cats ceased staring so intently at him. "Ah, you mean Rhys. He owned a shop in town and traveled to restore and trade rare books. He'd been a healthy man, in his thirties and quite athletic, but he was left bedridden after an injury." She patted a stout orange cat resting beside her. "Over time, most folks moved away to the larger villages. One night, his house picked itself up and left as well." She gestured to an empty plot now filled with towering sunflowers.

"Thank you, you've been a great help," Emory said. A black cat weaved itself around his feet, and he bent to scratch its back. Vertigo hit him, and he pinched the bridge of his nose as he rose—the portal had sapped the energy from him. "Is there a town with an inn nearby?"

"On the other side of the lake," she said. "I believe it's a two-hour journey on foot."

He bid farewell to her and set off through the woods. He could manage the hike, he told himself—

he was merely forty and often walked the trails outside Port Nassella when the city became too much for him. Emory had spotted the distant town through the trees, but it disappeared once he descended deeper into the woods.

Raindrops hit his nose, quickly giving way to a downpour. The ground grew slick and muddy, and he tripped over roots and vines as he tried to navigate the thick underbrush. Emory pitched forward, sliding down a small hill on the wet moss. Breathing hard, he drew himself upright again and saw lights through the trees. Was the town closer than he thought? He hurried forward and instead of an inn, he found the archive. Water ran down its black shingles and glistened on its gray stones. The door opened, and a voice rang out. "Get in. You're going to get hurt out here."

Emory cleaned his shoes as best he could before stepping inside, leaving them near the door. The archive creaked as shelves rearranged themselves, and stacks of books whirled into the air to reveal a couch. He sat heavily upon it.

"Are you alright?" the archive asked.

"I'm fine, thank you. Just exhausted. My colleague told me this was a twenty-mile trip from Port Nassella when it certainly was not."

"Yes, more like four hundred miles. Frankly, I'm impressed you found this place at all." The archive paused. "Sleep. We'll speak more later."

A thick quilt covered him when he woke. As he sat up, body exhausted from the trip and stumbling around in the rain, the front door opened. A man entered and tossed a small, warm bag at him. "Eat up."

"Rhys?"

He nodded. Rhys was thin and wiry, and his sharp eyes held pronounced lines beneath them. Any gray in his hair was well-hidden among the blond curls piled atop his head and cropped short on the sides. Rhys set a wooden cane by the door and with a gesture of his hand, a chair scuttled over to him. "I imagine you spoke with the woman living in my old village. Well, not living, but you understand."

"This used to be your shop, right?"

"Yes. I was a book restorer, traveling to remote places. Some ten years ago, I was hiking in the mountains, and I fell. Cracked my skull and damaged my cerebellum." He rubbed the back of his head. "Fortunately, my mind and charming personality remained intact, but I was left with a tremor. Dizziness. Difficulty walking. By the time I could move about my shop again, I had no customers. As it turns out, I was the main thing drawing people to my town. Without my shop, the town dwindled."

Rhys opened his bag and withdrew a sandwich from it, promptly biting into it. His hands shook as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

Emory followed suit, suddenly ravenous. "Gods, this is delicious," he murmured.

"Best bakery I've found." He gestured again, and the shutters opened. They were in a small village high in the mountains, with snowcapped peaks rising all around them. People in long coats and wool gloves walked the quiet streets.

"So you do leave the archive."

"Obviously," Rhys said, and then caught himself. "I leave. I'm less inclined to do so in cities. As you know, I still trade my books, but I'm not as keen on moving about in loud, crowded places where I'm likely to get jostled on the street."

"Your archive is a marvel of magical engineering," Emory said. "But why the mystique around trading your books?"

"A bit of intrigue drums up interest. I can travel using my house, but it's difficult to visit some places I used to go—I need people to come to me. Trading books with scholars gives me access to texts I can no longer acquire on my own."

"You don't seem fond of academics."

Rhys raised his eyebrows. "Tell me academics aren't some of the most rigid people you've ever met."

"Some are, but not all. There are many excellent scholars who aren't so entrenched in the dogma of their fields."

He leaned forward, his eyes boring into Emory's. "Why did you want to know so much about me? Is it scholarly interest? A mystery for you to solve?"

Emory shrugged. "I don't have many friends in Port Nassella or, frankly, anywhere else. I've seen my colleagues rush to trade you books and artifacts, and I thought maybe you'd like someone to talk to. A friend."

Rhys huffed and leaned back in his chair. "Is that it?" He stared at Emory for a long moment, and then he waved his hand. The house rumbled, and magic shimmered as the village outside fell away. It settled with a soft thump, and the shutters opened again to the field of flowers outside Port Nassella. Rhys stood and leaned on a tall stack of books, drumming his fingers along the spines. "Well, alright. Maybe I need a change of pace."

The golden light of sunset filtered into Emory's office as he put away his manuscript for the day. A door slammed, and he jumped. A pang of apprehension washed over him at the distant chatter and footsteps, and he gathered his bag, hoping there hadn't been another incident in the morgue. As he reached the base of the stairs, he merely found an excited group of graduate students.

"—first edition even."

"I asked for a text on aleuromancy and didn't get any sarcastic comments."

One of them turned to him as he approached. "Good afternoon, Dr. Ashbrook. The archive arrived in town yesterday and it's still here. What's more, it opened the inner doors, and it's letting people take almost anything."

"How curious."

He found the archive nestled on a side street lined with restaurants. He paused to buy a pair of chocolate croissants from a café and entered the building. Reginald waved to him, ushering Emory in and whispering loudly in his ear. "You've come at a marvelous time. The archive is in a better mood than I've ever seen it."

"And why is that?"

"I don't know, but I intend to stock my shelves before it changes its mind."

"By all means, stock your shelves, Reggie," the archive said. Reginald yelped and left for another room. As Emory passed a tall wooden cabinet, it creaked in a whisper to him. "Come upstairs."

The staircase was now free of books, and he climbed it. At the top, a door opened for him. Rhys sat in a massive antique wooden chair with a high, cushioned back of red velvet. "As you can see, I decided to offload some of my surplus."

"I see." Emory handed him the bag with the croissant. "Brought something for you."

"Ooh, I like these," he said, and stuffed the pastry in his mouth.

A woman's voice rang out from an intricate nest of spells hovering over his desk. "Excuse me, you

wouldn't have more texts on faerie architecture, would you?"

"Check the west room. Far wall, top shelf," Rhys said to his desk.

"Th—thank you!"

Emory leaned over to observe the small threads of magic linking Rhys into a glowing model of the downstairs, detailed down to the last book—so that was how he interacted with the people visiting his archive. "You really are a splendid engineer."

"Flattery and a croissant? Are you certain you don't want something from me?"

"It's not that, though you have my gratitude for helping me last weekend. Rather, I have a proposition for you."

"Oh?"

"Come to my home. I'm curious what you might think of my collection."

Rhys considered Emory with his piercing gaze and then shrugged. "Alright." He turned back to the spells hovering there. "Closing up shop for now, but I shall be here all week. Tell your friends." When the others had left, Rhys summoned his cane. The magic followed him as they descended the stairs, not quite touching him but ready to support him if he needed it.

Once they reached the street, Rhys kept pace with Emory, his heels and cane tapping a rhythm against the stone. A look passed over his face as they arrived at Emory's building. "This is rather—"

"Squalid? Depressing?" Emory gestured to the stained façade of the apartments. "Little did I know

when I signed my lease that these buildings are mostly occupied by graduate students in search of cheap rent."

"It does seem like a highly economical place to live," Rhys said as they climbed the stairs and Emory let him into his home. "Ah, now this is better."

"I aim to move, but Port Nassella is expensive."

Rhys arched an eyebrow, and his face broke into a terrible grin. "I'm downsizing my collection; perhaps I can clear the attic for you."

"You say that as a joke, but I would consider it," Emory said.

"Ah." He pursed his lips, turning abruptly to Emory's nearest bookshelf with a faint flush about his cheeks. "Let's see what you have. Good taste in divination texts. Quite the fiction collection. More poetry than I expected as well." He snatched a small book with a pale green cover and flipped through it. "Didn't take you for such a romantic. I've always heard his love poems were incredibly—" He blinked and went still redder in the face. "Vivid."

Emory laughed and covered his mouth with his hand. "Rather, I'm curious about your opinions on my necromancy texts. The translations."

Rhys traced his finger along the shelves, scanning the names of the authors. "All excellent, in my opinion. I've been looking for a copy of this one," he said as he stopped on a book with a plum cover.

"You're welcome to borrow anything you like. Or come over and read, if you don't mind visiting my squalid apartment."

"Your home is cozy and clearly better cared for than the exterior of the building."

Emory laughed. "I suppose giving compliments is like working a muscle. One improves with practice."

Rhys huffed and sat on the couch. He grew quiet, wearing a contemplative expression that gave way to discomfort as he ran his fingers through his hair. He leaned forward, his hands clasped. "There is something I would like to ask of you, and I admit it causes me apprehension. I would like your help."

Emory nodded, and Rhys continued. "In the village where I rested the archive after I found you, there is a shrine atop a small peak. It was built by one of the greatest translators of ancient texts, a man who went simply by the pen name Octavius in reference to the eight years he spent searching for a certain scroll. He created only a few hundred copies of his original work, which he made difficult to obtain, leaving them solely in his shrine. I wish to visit it."

"It's up a mountain, you say?"

"The peak is too small to perch the house, and the magic of the area makes it near impossible to open a portal there. The old mage likely knew that." He watched Emory, his eyes wide with emotion. "I just need to hike the last two miles from the village to the shrine. But I can't do it alone. If I fell—"

Emory sat beside him on the couch. "Of course I'll come with you."

The sun had yet to clear the morning haze when the archive landed in the mountainside village. Emory and Rhys bundled themselves in long coats and scarves and set out on the trail that wound upward. The immense snowcapped mountains rose around them, while sturdy spruces and pines grew from the rocky soil and provided some respite from the wind. Rhys's footfalls tapped out a deliberate pace against the ground, and as the path grew steeper, Emory met his gaze.

"Will you be disappointed if all the copies of his books are already gone?" he asked.

"Oh, I expect they are. I have known about this shrine for many years—always planned to visit it and never did. It's not as if I want to prove myself worthy of a copy, or even to prove to myself I can make the trip. No, I want to see the shrine for my satisfaction." His jaw was tight with resolve as he ignored the drop below them, hugging the inner side of the trail.

"No matter what we find there, I imagine the view is spectacular."

Rhys nodded, breathing hard as the sharp corner gave way to another incline. The wind ruffled their coats and blew away the morning haze until the sun beamed through the sparse branches of the trees. As the air grew warmer, Rhys stuffed his knit hat in his pocket, leaving his curly hair to sway in the breeze.

The glow of light around his head rendered him mildly angelic in contrast to his sour expression.

"What is it?" Emory asked.

"I don't wish to be so miserly with my knowledge and books that I become an old mage hiding his work up on a mountain."

"I'd say depositing one's books in a mountainside shrine is extreme, even by ivory tower standards. That's not you. Besides, if your current arrangement isn't working for you, you can change it."

Rhys hummed in response and grew quiet as they reached the final slope winding around the mountainside. He sped up, leaving Emory to fall behind him. As he crossed an uneven patch of stone, he staggered. Then he steadied himself, nodding to Emory as they ascended the last stretch of the hill. The trail leveled out, and the shrine rose before them. It was small and square, perhaps ten feet tall—insignificant before the vast mountain range. Emory craned his head back, watching the clouds swirl around the peaks. Rhys followed his gaze, and his eyes widened. Emory slung an arm around his shoulders.

"I'm not dizzy, you know," Rhys said with a quirk of his eyebrows.

"I know. Sometimes people offer pats on the back as signs of friendship and affection."

He laughed and returned the gesture.

They entered the shrine. The walls were lined with neat shelves carved into the stone. They were empty, without a scrap of paper to show that they ever held books. Nor were there any other adornments or

inscriptions left behind by the author. Instead, strands of stone and brass beads decorated the walls.

"What are these?" Emory asked.

"Charms made by people in the villages below. Presumably left here as a consolation prize."

Emory plucked a pair of the charms, running his fingers over the intricately carved beads. "They're beautiful." He handed one to Rhys. "Here."

Rhys grinned at him and wrapped it around his cane as he left the shrine. He stood outside, closing his eyes and holding his hands to the wind. Then he sat on a long, flat stone beside the shrine.

"Was it what you expected?" Emory asked as he sat beside him.

He considered the question and then tilted his head toward Emory. "Better. Because when I remember this trip, I'll remember that we made it together."

Chatter filtered through the thin walls as Emory unlocked the door to his apartment. Judging by the faint crackle of spells and frustrated groans, he guessed it was graduate students practicing divination. He shut the door and set his bag down. Across the room, beside the outer window, was a new door. He knocked on it, and after a moment, it opened.

Warmth and magic washed over him as he crossed the threshold. The fire crackled, and he smelled cinnamon and nutmeg.

"There are pastries in the oven," Rhys said. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"I have not." He peered out the windows at a quiet street on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The clouds shifted slowly in the distance, and the water sparkled in the late afternoon light. "Where is the archive today?"

"A town about an hour's ride west of Port Nassella."

Emory turned back to Rhys and smiled. "What a lovely view."

CATHERINE YEATES

Catherine Yeates is a writer, artist, and former neuroscience researcher. Their writing has been published in cjyeates.com.

Q&A with Catherine Yeates

The following questions were posed by Jennifer Shelby, author of *The Second Form of Ginny Elder*, and are answered by Catherine Yeates about their story *The Scholar of the Journeying Archive.*

To begin, I'd like to say that I adored this story. It made me think of Becky Chambers' *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell.* One thing that tickled me early on was the mention of "divination by onion" and I was wondering if you'd be willing to let us know what that would look like.

> First off, thank you! I am flattered by the comparison. I remember reading about divination using onions while down a research rabbit hole. As it turns out, there are multiple options, from carving words on them to cutting them up, sprinkling them with salt, and using them to predict the weather. Within the context of the story, I imagine people might write a

question accompanied by "yes" or "no" on a pair of onions, and then determine which sprouts first.

I don't imagine it's a particularly reliable form of divination, even in a world where magic exists.

I would love to read more of Emory, Rhys, and the archive. Do you think you'll ever revisit these characters?

I really enjoyed writing Emory and Rhys! I can see myself revisiting them. Writing this made me curious about what else might exist in the world of this story. I could also see myself writing a longer story with a version of these characters in a different setting.

Do you think the archive could ever be convinced to trade in fiction? Because, uh, I have a few books I could trade ***stacks of books collapse behind me***

Oh for sure! Granted, I bet Rhys has some strong opinions on fiction as well as nonfiction. If they ever attempt a book club, Emory should probably make sure Rhys has some delicious pastries to snack on to keep the man's acerbic comments to a minimum.

What was your journey as you wrote this story? Did it come to you all at once, or reveal itself in layers like, um ... an onion? Wait. Did you divine this story by onion?

Haha, no onions or divination were involved in writing this story!

It did come in layers, though. The story started as a brief description I had jotted down of Rhys and Emory and a magical, traveling building. I cycled through many different ideas for their backgrounds before ultimately setting the story aside.

Later on, I wrote a cozy fantasy story that was ultimately published in a mini-issue of *Wyngraf*. One of the characters came from an academic background in divination and necromancy, and so I thought it might be fun to write a different story about a professor with the same training. I remembered my work in progress, and then I thought about what circumstances might bring Emory and Rhys together.

Seven Flavors of the Seven Winds

By Akis Linardos

Full moon night and the Avians flock to our tea shop atop the Elder Tree, weary from the hunt. The beacon we set up leads them here, shining indigo to nocturnal eyes like ours. Other Avians are ten times bigger than me, but I'm never intimidated. Citeans like me are extremely rare. Size of a cat and wingspan of an owl. Fluffy-cute face like an owl too, the Eagleborn say. I don't agree, but that's fine. Helps with sales.

Now, I wouldn't be here had it not been for my best buddy Azu. He's the one that brews the tea. As a Fethrian, he shares traits with humans—handsome face, hairy chest, sinewy arms—and his wings drape over his arms like a cape. Unlike other Fethrian, his wings have blue marks (they kinda look like a peacock's tail, but don't tell him I said that). The pole with a green lantern he carries over his back makes him look like an angler fish. He needs that to see because he lost his nocturnal vision years ago.

He spends his time at the workshop by the canopy's center, where we have herbs stashed in jars and the seven winds sealed in tubes. Everyone loves his tea. My favorite is Eastern Calm. Redolent with jasmine and an aftertaste of fresh raspberries. You don't just feel it in your tongue, but down to the roots of your feathers. I like to spread the tea over my pinions when the tea shop is closed, and I extend my wings so the night's cold will accentuate that tingling sensation. I pity humans for their winglessness.

It's a whole new world of experience. To taste the flavors of the wind.

Azu leans over his tea kettle and pours water, then places it on a grille above a triangle of three burning candles. In the coverts of his left wing, he has strapped his ocarina.

After serving a table of Eagleborn, earning myself a hefty tip, I approach Azu's workbench. "How goes the brewing, buddy?"

He fills a cup with boiling water. "Fine."

"You sure? You seem grumpy."

"I said I'm fine."

He's a proud cockatoo is what he is. "What happened?"

He sighs. "Can you leave me alone? I have orders to tend to. It's a hectic night."

I wing up and land on his shoulder to preen his neck-feathers.

He waves a hand at me. "Remi! My feathers are fine! Can you go take some orders and leave me be?"

I catch him glimpsing over at a table and follow his gaze to see a group of Fethrian—all of them female. They whisper and look at Azu, giggling. Ah. Knowing Azu, he has interpreted these chuckles as derogatory. Nothing to hurt a male's chirping pride as much as the misunderstood chuckle of the opposite gender. Azu had always hated the color of his wings, and after he lost his night vision, too, his self-esteem drifted downriver.

I nod at the table of chuckling females. "I think the girl with the blonde feathers there likes you."

He flushes. "What—where—Why did you?"

"Haven't you noticed? She's been coming here a lot. Brought some friends today it seems. Guess she wants to show you off. Girls like to talk about their prey."

"Prey?"

"I'll go say hi."

I glide off his shoulder and toward the table, taking a sly sort of pleasure as Azu pleads for me to wait.

The Fethrian girl—whose name she'd told me is Saheila—takes graceful steps toward Azu's workbench. I've perched on her shoulder. Her hair and feathers smell of rosemary and thyme. Azu crushes cloves in his hands, and it mingles with the

aroma of turmeric in the boiling water. He feigns being too busy to notice us.

"This is Saheila," I say. "She wanted to watch how you infuse wind into tea."

Hands behind her back Saheila smiles and lifts one of her wings in greeting. Azu graces us with a glimpse, nods quickly, says hey, and turns back to his work. Buddy is shy.

He turns to one of the hissing kettles, and I notice the spaced-out stupor in his gaze. He's not focused. The female presence has his blood pumping faster. He pulls out the kettle and pours the water into a jar full of Tiger Roses. A purple cloud wafts out, sharp and acrid like burned coffee. He just ruined the whole batch.

"Oh my," Saheila says. "Was that supposed to happen?"

"Yes," I say at the same moment Azu says, "No."

She laughs. "Which is it?"

I raise the pinions of my wings in a shrug. "Custom order. You're not supposed to do that, but some customers have what you could call *acquired taste.* We had an order for steamed algae and kelp once. Nasty business, but customer's always right."

She laughs once more and the sly pride warms my chest again. Where do I come up with that stuff?

Azu frowns at me questioningly.

I should get him to work with wind. That always gets him into a state of flow. Would clear up his mind. "We have an order for a Kemian Snow. How about you work these wild winds?"

Azu nods and pulls out two sealed tubes with frosted rims. From within one comes a low rumbling like the approach of an earthquake. From the other, a howling like a wolf trapped in a cave.

"What are they?" Saheila asks.

I'm about to answer when Azu jumps in, "Northeast and northwest varieties. The wildest kind."

He brings his ocarina—the one attached to the pinions of his left wing—to his mouth. Saheila is about to say something, but I whisper, "Better stay quiet for this one. It's a delicate process."

Azu's song is beautiful and soft as a mother's lullaby. The rumbling softens and the howling turns to a low whimper. Slowly, he places the tubes on either side of the tea kettle. Unscrews the Northeastern variety first. The wind sighs out of the tube like a cobra dancing to the tune of a snake charmer, its shape distinct as an icy mist. He told me he could no longer see it after he lost his nocturnal sight, but it didn't matter. He'd played with wind infusion for so long, it came naturally after a while. Seeing is optional at a certain level of mastery—same as how these Fethrian bards never look at their lutes and yet always strike the right strings.

Northwestern variety meanders out next—a blurry spiral that exudes a low hum—and intertwines with Northeastern. They drift into the mixture. Saheila and I lean over to see inside the tea kettle. A whirlpool forms on the liquid surface. Like a miniature depiction of a turbulent ocean, waves

thrash against the ceramic walls. Then Azu brings his hand down on the lid, and ceases his song.

Saheila claps. "*Nefta's wings*, that was beautiful."

Azu smiles. "These are the wildest of all the seven winds we have stored."

"I should try one myself next time. If only to hear you playing that lovely song again."

Azu blushes. "Uhm, yeah. Sure. But they're very strong. Especially if combined like that."

His voice is about to break. Poor boy is struggling to keep a straight face. Must be sweating throughout. I jump in. "Had one of the Northeastern variety once. It's like lightning cracked the stems of my feathers. Takes a while to get used to."

"But once you do, your muscles become like water," Azu says. "Flying will feel as effortless as floating down a river."

"What about the Northern wind?" Saheila asks.

Azu shakes his head and points to the sign of our teashop, which reads *Seven Flavors of the Seven Winds*. "The eighth wind—the Northern one—is too wild to tame. I could never fit him into a tube without him shattering it apart. But if you ever fly at the edge of the Forest of Kem and reach the peak of Gori Mountain when the moon sits at its crest, spread your wings and take a deep, deep breath. You will feel him. He'll flow from your nostrils down to your coverts to the tips of your feathers. An icy river so cold it's hot. Feels like fire. Like you froze the sun then swallowed it whole."

The girl smiles. Azu smiles. The moment lingers too long. No one says anything. Before it becomes

awkward, I say, "We're closing shop soon. Azu will go wind gathering to the north. Why don't you go with him? He can show you Gori's peak, too."

Azu's lips mash together soundlessly. The girl says, "Sure. I'd love to."

Azu closes his mouth. Smiles. Nods. *Attaboy.*

I flick my left wing to wave the last of the Avians away as I clean up the tables. Azu has strapped on his tubes to store the winds, and the straps crisscross between his wings, buckles latching at either shoulder.

"Ready," he says to Saheila who stands beside him then turns to me. "I'll be back by dawn."

"No need. Will enjoy having you off my back for a while. Citeans are solitary by nature you know."

He pulls a bucket-sized cup from beneath his workbench. Jasmine aromas waft out of it. "I prepared an Eastern Calm."

A mirthful hoot escapes me. "*Hoot! Hoot!* Oh, that's going to be one lovely night."

"Enjoy," he says and turns to leave, but halts. "Ah, and Remi ..."

"Hm?"

He smiles. "Thank you."

"Get lost, you chirping lark."

As they wing up and away, I lean over the Eastern Calm, allowing its jasmine-infused vapors to wash over my face. I hover over it for a while. A tingling sensation slides over my wings and I swear the stems

of my feathers pop out a tad with small bubbly clicks. I snap at the water with my beak and tilt my head back to let the tea slide in me. So warm and cozy. I douse my pinions and my talons with it. The fruity sensation comes to my tongue, then to the base of my feathers.

I lay back and look at the stars dappled by the purple canopy. I immerse my perception in the forest sounds of crickets, frogs and fluttering leaves. My mind empties to a comfortable void, and I surrender to the feeling of the night breeze as it gently caresses my tea-soaked feathers.

AKIS LINARDOS

In a cove of a Greek island, Akis was born a sane infant, but has since then grown to enter the chaotic world of adults—a choice he deeply regrets. He studies biomedical AI, hoping there's something less dystopian to come from this tech. His stories delve both into wholesome worlds and ones of extreme darkness. He has published one more story with the same world and characters as this one. "His Glowing Feathers" follows Azu's self-discovery journey at Murderbirds: An Avian Anthology. Read more from him in linktr.ee/akislinardos.

Q&A with Akis Linardos

The following questions were posed by A. P. Howell, author of *Between the Storms*, and are answered by Akis Linardos about their story *Seven Flavors of the Seven Winds*.

The story opens in a way that made me start taking notes mentally, classifying Citeans, Eagleborn, Fethrian ... it's a sort of technical exercise, ordering the world. (I enjoy that exercise; it's not only applicable to speculative genres, but more obviously necessary in those cases where the world is quite different from our own and only exists in the writer's head.) But then the story just gives way to experiences; I didn't have the same analytical impulse to sort the winds or figure out exactly what Azu was doing with the tea, because what mattered was Azu talking to a girl. My process question about your worldbuilding is whether it's an additive or

subtractive process. Do you know the world's details first, or does the story precede the details?

> This story is a very special case as it was a sequel to a world that pre-existed (I wrote another story where Azu loses his night sight to save Remi). More to your question though, my process is now one of letting the world evolve alongside the story as I do exploration writing without prior outlines. Usually world details will lend themselves to some symbolism of the theme, which in this case is wind-tea for peace and calm in harmony with nature.

While reading, I was reminded of the "Tales of Ba Sing Se" episode of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, where Iroh encourages his nephew Zuko to go on a date with a customer at their tea shop. It's a nice, cozy moment embedded in a story that is dark and complex. Do you imagine this scene in your story as typical of the world, or is it a moment of peace amid turmoil?

> Big fan of *[Avatar: The] Last Airbender*, and probably inspired here because who doesn't love Uncle Iroh. This world is a rather peaceful one with its share of conflict that falls more along the lines of "surviving in nature" because there are no large societies, inspired by Zelda mostly.

Maybe because I write some darker stuff (or maybe just because I live in the world), I tend to poke at stories to find where the darkness lurks—or the

commentary on real-world darkness. Is the "fluffy-cute" assessment a character bit, or a hint at discrimination between Avians? Is Azu's vision an example of disability (and so an example of the social model in fiction, with Azu using a lantern to compensate) or a natural part of aging (and so an extra layer to the bildungsroman)?

> I also write dark, so I get it, and this was very off-brand for me, haha. But yes, Azu has been stigmatized because of his feathers, and has grown an outcast which is why he found friendship in someone outside of his own species (Remi). In trying to get rid of has sacrificed his sight in the story prior to this one.

I'm curious about your process for writing from the Citean point of view, specifically the size difference. My default (as a reader and writer) is to visualize characters as people of around the same dimensions. (I'd even do this in D&D games with halflings PCs, where it was only an occasional mechanical issue, and even then I wasn't the DM so didn't need to keep tabs on it.) Do you see the story from inside the skull of a POV character or is it more cinemati%mniscient—or completely non-visual?

> I often write child characters because their innocence lends itself to soften the blow of darkness my worlds tend to have (my story Daughter, Mother, Charcoal is one such example) and I go deep in the POV to make everything larger and scarier. In the case of

> Remi, because he is flying the size difference doesn't matter too much as he is mostly on the same level by standing on a shoulder or floating around the place above everyone. He is in a safe zone though, if it was a dark story I'd leverage this much more for sure by injuring his wings.

What is it about tea? Specifically, what is it about tea in Anglosphere speculative fiction at this moment? As readers, we know the historical evils of the tea trade (and recent SF books have pointed this out at some length). But whether or not it's a reader's favored beverage, it's become code for comfort and community.

> I grew in a mountainous island, with a lot of history on herbs, and I have associated nights by the fireplace with chamomile and faskomilo (greek herbs). There is evil in most trades, but I've had winter nights with tea freshly gathered from the mountain and there's no comparison to that comfort (except stew). This small society is like this too as illustrated by the ending. Wild gathering.

The Second Form of Ginny Elder

Hermit, Failed Human, Grandmother, Leshy

By Jennifer Shelby

The ghost of a fox with a badly broken hind leg skirted the edge of Ginny Elder's garden, crouching low as an airplane rumbled overhead. A red-winged blackbird named Crimson, Crim for short, flew to Ginny's shoulder and trilled a welcome to the spirit. Ginny grunted as her hip protested getting to her feet, but she spoke softly to the ghost, "Hello there, little one. Don't be afraid."

The fox circled twice before coming closer. "You're dead, you know," Ginny told him as kindly as she could. "That broken leg needn't bother you anymore."

A wave of orange color rippled over the fox's ghostly white fur and he whined. Ginny bent down and rubbed his head. He snuggled into her wrinkled hand as though he relished the small comfort. "Of

course I'll help, just let me get my things," she told him.

Her joints loosened as Ginny walked back to her cabin for her gloves and the bone sack she'd stitched from old raincoats. Inside, herbs hung from the rafters while a collection of skulls and carefully articulated animal skeletons filled the space between. The windows were grubby; Ginny had long ago learned that birds did not crash into dirty windows.

She pulled her silver hair into a ponytail and offered a small seed to Crim, "Come on, old friend, shall we?" Crim fluttered his red epaulets and accepted the seed. She pointedly ignored the guano the bird deposited on her shoulder. She knew he didn't do it on purpose and besides, her bladder leaked sometimes too.

"All right, fox friend, why don't you lead us to your body, then?" said Ginny to the fox.

The fox yelped and turned back into the forest, guiding the elderly woman and her bird through the undergrowth, his front half low to the ground and ears alert to every sound, while his rear legs limped along as though disconnected, a vulnerability that would be deadly if the fox were more than a spirit.

The ghost led them into the spruce grove where the barred owls nested, past the patch of centuries-old maples where the owlets learned to hunt, and into a thicket of brambles where Ginny almost lost the spirit as she tried to avoid the thorns. Crim soon had her on the fox's tail again, scolding the ghost for not minding his friend.

Down, they descended a steep ravine thick with ferns. Ginny reached for a makeshift walking stick to keep her own legs safe. At the bottom, the fox sniffed at a rocky stream strewn with fir needles and heavy with butterflies.

This they followed until the ghost fox stopped at a hollow beneath the stilt roots of a young yellow birch. He whined up to Ginny as he sniffed at the stained curve of his skull peeking up from last summer's leaves.

Ginny nodded and donned her gloves as Crim flew into the birch's boughs to supervise. Her index finger poked through a hole she'd forgotten to mend on the left glove and she mentally berated herself for her carelessness. She reached for the fox's bones and settled them gently into her sack anyway. There were always some bones missing when the body was this far gone, carried off by scavengers or gnawed for the calcium by herbivores, but so long as the broken leg bone remained, she should be able to help the ghost.

It was. The fracture ran along the fox's rear, left femur, a bad break that most certainly led to his death. "How did you know to come to me, fox?" she asked him as she showed it to him.

The fox didn't answer. The animals never did, at least not in a way that Ginny could understand. "You should have come sooner," she said in a whisper, this time more to herself.

Crim tweeted a scold. "You're right, he was probably afraid of me," she answered. The bird chirped again. "Sorry, afraid of people."

She placed the last, a tiny foot bone, into her sack. Some animals required a full articulation to convince their ghosts to leave their old ailments behind, but sometimes mending only the broken bone was enough. Ginny had learned to gather all the bones she could, just in case.

She tucked her gloves into the sack as well. The finger that had poked through the hole itched and she moved to the stream to rinse off her hands.

The fox followed them home, yelping at ghost mice that skittered through the duff while Crim sang a marsh song. With Ginny's hands too full for a walking stick, it was slower going, but there wasn't any rush.

Her thoughts slipped back to her old life in the city as she walked, the terrified wife of a violent monster. Sometimes the sight of broken bones conjured such memories. No. She pulled herself back to the present, calling to Crim to anchor her with talons digging into her shoulder.

They reached the cabin as the shadows grew long. "We'll have to soak the bones in soap overnight," Ginny warned the fox. "Then another, longer soak to remove the bits of tissue." She petted the ghost's head, admiring the fluff of its ghost fur. "None of this will hurt you, I promise, but I would like to have your permission."

The fox yipped and licked at her hand.

The sun shone bright upon a dewy morning as Ginny tended to the clean bones. The fox sat at her feet, patient and trusting now. Ginny dipped a stick into a sun-warmed tin of birch tar, black, sticky, and reeking of smoke. She made a mental note to make a new batch soon as she smeared the tar onto the broken edges of the damaged leg bone and slotted them back together.

The fox gave a noise between a bark and a growl while Ginny tied a small scrap of fabric around the bone to keep it tight until the tar hardened. With a bit of luck, this would be the end of her task and the fox would be free to run and play again. A full articulation of the fox's skeleton could take weeks, even months.

She held out the bone for the fox to inspect. "It will always bear the mark, but it is mended. You don't have to feel the pain anymore," she told him. She wished, not for the first time, that the forest magic which gave her this skill allowed her to heal these ghosts faster, without the necessity of collecting and cleaning their bones. A wave of the hand and they could scamper into their afterlives without the horror of their deaths haunting them. But a few weeks, to a forest, was nothing; the time it takes an egg to hatch a wild bird.

The fox walked in a cautious circle, testing his leg. He tried a little run next, releasing a happy yip as he

leapt into the air. Ginny smiled to herself. The ghost, rippling from orange to ghostly white and back again, bounded up to her, licked her fingers once, then disappeared into the woods.

Crim landed on her shoulder and chirped into her ear. "Yes, he was an easy one in the end, wasn't he?" She gathered what remained of the fox's bones. She'd keep the skull to remind her of the fox she'd grown fond of after their week together and leave the rest near the den of a porcupine mother who could use the calcium.

The honk of a car horn pierced through the birdsong of the forest. Ginny's head spun, feeling the two worlds of her life collide.

What day was it, she wondered. The eighteenth, she realized as her granddaughter Maya stepped out of the path that led to the road. Maya's hair was electric blue this month, glowing in the sunlight as she held up two reusable grocery bags in her hands as a wave.

"Oh, darling girl, you have to stop spending all your money on me," Ginny scolded as she always did. In truth, she was mortified that her granddaughter never visited empty-handed. Ginny survived very well off her little garden and foraging in the forest.

"Let me do it, Gran, it's my love language." Maya planted a kiss on Ginny's cheek. The girl smelled of strawberries and Ginny breathed in the scent with a smile on her lips.

"Hello, Crim." Maya curtsied to the bird and sent him tittering with excitement.

Ginny opened the door to the cabin and Maya hauled the bags inside. She gestured to the fox skull. "New one?"

Ginny nodded. "A little fox with a broken leg. Sweet fellow. He's better now."

Maya had the Sight in ways Ginny couldn't fathom. While Ginny saw animal spirits after coming to the forest, Maya had seen ghosts, fairies, and any number of frightening creatures since childhood. No one believed the girl, calling her frights and wonders imaginary, but Ginny always had, first out of loyalty and then from her own experience. Maya loved her fiercely for it.

"I have the coolest Granny of anyone I know." Maya smiled, a dimple puckering her cheek.

"Well, my granddaughter has the coolest hair I've ever seen."

Maya patted her head with a small smile. "Mom hates it."

"Don't worry, moms are supposed to. And how is your mother?" Ginny's daughter had never gotten over the revelation that her beloved father had been prone to spousal abuse when he was alive. The girl was too loyal to accept the truth, Ginny supposed. Their relationship never recovered.

Maya unloaded a bag of birdseed and a series of vegetables from her bags. "She's busy. She's taking on this big case against one of the city's major polluters, hoping to force them into taking responsibility for the damage to the river. And, of course, she's frustrated because that's small potatoes compared to climate change."

Ginny nodded, moving the veggies into a basket she could lower into her root cellar later. "The storms are definitely getting worse. We lost a stretch of maples in the last one."

"It's been like that everywhere." Maya stared out the dirty cabin window for a small stretch. "Record heatwaves, impossibly powerful thunderstorms, the forest fires out west. Summer is getting scarier than winter, which boggles my mind."

Shuddering, Ginny wiped her hands on a threadbare, grubby towel. Maya chuckled. "Gran, are you literally washing your hands of climate change?"

Ginny raised her hands in the air and let them drop. "Out here, you can see it, all the changes creeping in and the wildlife adapting. Their lives grow harder and they keep leveling up to match. There will be pockets where nature is going to survive, where all that leveling up is going to matter." She tried to quiet the bitterness in her voice before Maya noticed. "And I find it infinitely better for my mental health to focus on those pockets."

Maya put her hand on Ginny's shoulder. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"We should be upset, we need to be upset. We're not upset enough!"

Maya smiled, but her brow creased. "You sound like Mom."

Ginny grimaced. "You didn't tell her where I am, did you?"

"I did not and I won't because I respect your privacy, but ..." Maya sighed. "She's worried you're going to die out here, alone."

Ginny chuckled. "That is exactly how I want to go. I would wither if I had to move into a home crowded with people, and it would be a miserable, torturous death. This is where I want to be, where I want to end, haunting the woods with the little fox and all the others."

An odd expression crossed Maya's face. "I guess I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Your mother." Ginny stopped herself and shook her head before trying again. "She might have it in her to save the world, but she only sees an ending when she looks at me. She thinks my life is already finished, that I've reached an obscene age and there should be nothing left but quiet afternoons under a shawl, thinking long thoughts and waiting to die."

Maya nibbled on a nut from the birdseed she'd brought. "And what do you see?"

"I think I still have a few beginnings left inside me. We're taught that women's lives are maiden then mother then crone, but I don't know, sometimes, out here, it seems like there is so much more."

Maya walked over and wrapped her arms around her grandmother from behind, resting her chin on her shoulder. "I'm all for you turning into your second form as a fierce nature warrior at eighty-two, if that's a possibility."

Ginny chuckled and patted her arm. "Stay for dinner, won't you?"

Ginny never slept the night after her beloved Maya visited. She wanted to, but somehow pieces of her old life clung to the girl and sparked in Ginny's presence, growing into intrusive thoughts after Ginny went to bed.

She sighed, peeling off the covers and stepping outside, a ragged shawl about her shoulders. The fireflies were quieting now, but the peepers sang a fine chorus and the stars were bold overhead. There'd be no sleeping tonight and she'd long since learned it was better to be tired alone than tired and hollowed from a night of reliving things she couldn't change.

"I'm like one of my ghosts," she whispered aloud to herself. "Still carrying around everything that destroyed me in my former life." It comforted her to talk to herself on nights like this. "I wonder if that's why the forest sends spirits my way. It knows I understand."

She'd once thought helping the spirits was the price the forest demanded in exchange for the peace it afforded her, but Ginny had given up that idea when she finally recognized the ingrained capitalism of that whole idea. No, the forest was an ecosystem, everything interconnected, interdependent, and she was happy, even proud, to be a part of it. She fit here in ways her introverted self never had in her old life.

She'd never seen ghosts before she came here. They had come with the forest, mixed up in her own ideas about rebirth and remaking, reclaiming her life in late middle age, determined that it wasn't too late. Why not ghosts, after all? They added meaning to her life, small missions that only she could solve, soothing the aches of her past failures.

If only there were a ghost here now to distract her. Memories hung like specters in the shadows, looming with the promise of devouring her, each one a gasp of pressure of her chest.

She wished she could hug her knees to soothe herself the way she used to do when she was young. A barred owl hooted from somewhere close, easing the panic creeping over Ginny, reminding her where she was. In the forest, in the woods, in the place where she was safe.

"Another one?" Ginny shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand as the tenth turkey vulture in as many minutes flew overhead. "I'm going to follow them," she decided. Crim flew from her shoulder to perch by the fox skull and tucked his beak under his wing. "All right. You stay here, then."

A warm breeze carried the scent of fireweed blossoms and balsam fir across the garden. Ginny closed her eyes and inhaled, allowing the wild scent to soothe her. She opened her eyes to watch the leaves sway and shush in the small breeze.

Five vultures glided overhead, their long shadows falling over Ginny's path. The forest fell oddly quiet, the songbirds uncertain of the large birds overhead. Ginny followed her own paths, certain that the vultures were headed to the gash left from a clearcut some years back that hadn't fully healed over yet. She travelled over the ridge where chanterelles would soon flourish, past the old birch where the lynx denned last winter, down a deep hollow following a dry streambed, until the green-softened scar of clearcut broke the forest open.

Ginny slowed, keeping to the imagined safety of the forest, peering out at the opening. Daisies, fireweed, and raspberries worked to fill the space, but they only grew in the untrodden places, leaving wide trails for animals to cautiously follow and heavy rains wash out. Twenty-odd turkey vultures clung to the few trees left standing in the clearcut, shocked poles with tufts of green at the top, fearful of wild winds and just beginning to fathom there was space to spread their branches. Another handful of vultures sat on a pile of logs left to rot, their wings spread out to catch the sun's warmth or dry the last of the morning's dew.

In the midst of the swaying wildflowers, Ginny caught a glimpse of gore as one of the vultures pulled a morsel of flesh from a decomposing body. She needed to find higher ground to see who the creature had been.

Her tree climbing days were probably over, she warned herself, searching for a boulder or an uprooted tree to climb over. There, a glimpse of

ghost, in the tall fireweed. Ginny put her hand on a branch for balance and leaned forward, squinting. The branch she held onto shifted slightly, but Ginny didn't dare shift her gaze or she would lose sight of the ghost.

A wisp of the spirit towered over the purple spears of fireweed. A prickle of tears stabbed at Ginny's eyes when an antler formed, thinking of the old bull moose who had lived in these woods as long as she had, his tracks in the mud as comforting as a letter from an old friend.

The branch shifted under her hand again, and this time her gaze dropped to see what she'd gripped. A long, green, barked arm led to a hand made of branches. Ginny gasped and looked up to meet a pair of dark eyes that watched her steadily from what could only be the trunk of a tree. She released the arm at once, her fingers tingling with a strange energy.

"I'm sorry!" Ginny managed to say. The tree face seemed to smile, then closed their eyes and disappeared completely, leaving only a tree, a branch, and a bewildered Ginny. She held her breath, certain this was a hallucination. Given the ghosts she'd seen on a regular basis these past years, her mind struggled, aware of what she might not know of the world.

The ghost shifted, the movement drawing her attention away from the tree. These were not the antlers of a moose. They curled around each other in a way no antlers should, forming something closer to a crown than a rack. Bits of ghost moss hung down

like strings of pearls, glistening with dew. A lynx skull worn over its face obscured the details of the creature save the green glow of its eyes, haloed by the fog of its ghostliness. The creature rose onto two legs, not unlike tree trunks in the way it's skin seemed to twist and scale, that ended in two hooves. Its arms hung like braided vines, reaching forward and backward and into the earth like hungry roots. If such a beast had wanted to reach for something, there would have been few means of escaping such tendrils. Ginny watched, her jaw fallen open, as the vultures shifted from the spirit creature's path and it disappeared into the thickest part of the wood.

She soon made her way home, brooding over the strangeness of it until Crim landed on her shoulder and her cottage was in sight. "I've never seen a creature like that, Crim. I'm so full of questions I've nowhere to begin."

She described what she'd seen to Maya on her next visit. "It wore an old skull over its face, and had antlers that could have been branches, moss all hanging down from them like it had grown there. The proportions of its body didn't make any biological sense, which made me think of monsters, and its eyes were this bold, emerald green." Ginny took a deep breath. "Have you even seen anything like it?"

Maya's brow scrunched. "No, but it reminds me of something." She pulled out her phone and started scrolling, searching. "I learned about this folklore monster slash creature on a podcast last week. A forest god turned demon once Christianity took hold, you know how those stories go." She leaned into her

phone, eyes scanning back and forth. "Yeah, here it is, a leshy. He's a shapeshifter who can appear as anything in his woodland, plant or animal, tall as his tallest tree, or small as his smallest plant. The only consistent thing is that his eyes are always this weird green."

Ginny poured them cups of tea. "Is it always a he?"

Maya shrugged. "The patriarchy can't have a lady guarding the woods, now can they?"

Ginny smirked into her teacup. "So what's this leshy do?"

Maya scrolled deeper into the bright light of her phone. "Most records say they're a trickster. Others say they have magical powers which they use to punish those who harm their woods. The stories go way back, like, thousands of years back." She looked up and caught her Gran's eye. "How is there a monster out there seeking revenge for damaged ecosystems and we haven't heard of it yet?"

Ginny crossed her arms and shook her head. "Worse, why are they dying when the world needs them the most?"

Ginny eyed the leshy spirit, keeping to the edges of the forest beyond her little garden, lingering, skulking, like so many animals who had come to her before. "You needn't be afraid," she called out to the spirit.

They stepped into her garden, standing among the tomatoes with their strange legs and puzzled body. "Do you need my help?" she asked them.

The leshy watched her, their green eyes glowing in their strange way, their arm tendrils writhing into the soil, buds bursting into leaves that grew bright then faded to yellow and fell to the ground in the time it took Ginny to take a breath. The Leshy nodded, stiff, as though the action was alien.

"It's usually just a bone or two preventing your spirit from being truly free. A mental blockage. I get them myself sometimes. Don't worry, I'll do everything I can to help."

The leshy shifted their head. No longer a lynx skull with the circlet of antlers and glowing eyes, it became Crim's own head, cocked the way he did when something she said confused him.

Ginny looked away, disturbed to see the leshy's eyes shining from her best friends' disembodied head. "Just let me get my things."

She retrieved her gloves and the handsewn sack she used for bones, though it seemed woefully small for a creature the size of the spirit. Into her pocket, she stuffed her old scarf and glanced at Crim. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to stay here, there may still be some scavengers afoot."

Crim bowed his head and sang three notes of agreement. Ginny nodded. "You watch the garden, then." As she left, she reached for the walking stick she kept by the door.

The leshy made a sound close to a grunt and gestured for her to follow. She shouldn't have been

able to keep up with the leshy's long strides, but the creature settled easily into her gait. Their ghostly tendrils reached out to the leafy things and caressed them like a mother might her baby's cheek as they walked. Closer to their destination, those same tendrils lingered over the sap-sticky stumps left behind by the loggers.

A few crows and smaller critters scattered as they approached the leshy's remains. A dryad sat on her haunches beside the bones, as though guarding them.

Ginny took a deep, awed breath. This was the creature she had seen just before the leshy. The dryad had wide, dark eyes that seemed to take everything in. Her skin was bark, scaled, with grooves delineating her cheekbones, her nose, her mouth. Her hair was a mess of twigs twisted into a squirrel's nest. The dryad's arms and legs were bark, with sharp pieces jutting off at her elbows and her knees. Her feet were coiled roots Ginny suspected longed to plunge deep into the soil and begone with this task of guarding bones.

"You are the woman who tends to the dead," said the dryad. Her voice sounded like the susurrus of leaves.

Ginny nodded, tongue-tied as her old city self. Some things, she supposed, frustrated with herself, did not change. The dryad and the leshy consulted with each other in their own way while Ginny tied her scarf around her nose and pulled on her gloves. Her finger poked through the hole she'd forgotten to mend since the fox bones, and she closed her eyes, biting back a curse. These bones were caked with

rotting bits of tissue. Bones like this were the reason she wore gloves in the first place.

Oh well, there was nothing she could do to help it now. She set her sack open on the ground and reached for the first bone. A fox tibia, a beaver's flat tail, a moose's spinal column. This skeleton would be a nightmare to articulate should she need to. Ginny squinted at a piece of branch wedged into a deer pelvis as though it were a femur and put it aside. A human ulna made her pause. She hadn't realized the leshy's body could incorporate human bones. What was it Maya had said? That the leshy could become any creature within their forest.

Ginny ran her fingers along the mass of bone and found the scar of a healed fracture halfway along its length. Her husband had broken her arm in a similar fracture, a week after their daughter was born. The baby had screamed so whenever the cold of the plaster cast had touched her skin. What were the odds that the leshy had suffered a similar fracture?

No. She was the human in the leshy's forest, she was the creature they could take form of, and this was the form of her ulna. When she met the leshy's eyes, she held it up. "This is mine, yes? I'm one of you? One of the forest?"

The spirit leshy moved toward her, shifted past the mess of their old bones, and gestured to their antlers. Ginny took hold of them and pulled them from the gore and brambles. They came as a whole unit, interwoven like a wreath. A silk moth had spun a cocoon in a space between the coiled bone, and the

moss was a soft green as it hung in tendrils from it. It almost looked like a crown.

She wondered if that was what killed the leshy, but she couldn't be sure, she'd never seen anything like this before. The thing was heavy, lopsided, the pressure on their skull as it grew must have been tremendous. "Seems a shame someone like you is Mortal," she said aloud.

The leshy's green eyes glowed.

"Well," said Ginny, nervous at the enormity of the task ahead of her. "I'll do what I can with this."

The leshy made a happy sound and bowed deeply, getting down on their knee before the ghostly fog of its form dissolved into the air around it. Ginny stared, certain they had just crossed over before she'd done anything. Surely that wasn't right.

She pulled off her now disgusting gloves, her one finger tingling where the hole had been, and dropped them into her sack. The antlers, at least, were weathered and without gore. She would carry them home to puzzle out how they caused the leshy's demise, leaving the rest of the bones for now.

She stopped at a stream on the way home, set down the circlet of antlers, and washed her hands as best she could, scooping up a bit of sand to scrub the finger that had poked through the glove. The tingling shifted into an eerie numbness.

Once home, she set the circlet carefully onto her garden table and went inside to find some soap. "Sorry, Crim," she told the bird when he scolded her for failing to greet him. "Just a bit agitated." She scrubbed to no avail, the skin growing hard as an old

callus rather than raw, while she internally berated herself for not taking enough care around the bones.

By morning, the numbness had spread to the knuckles of her left hand. Ginny opened her eyes to see a ragged sunbeam stretching from her little window to shine upon the affected hand. The skin looked strangely scaled in its brightness, and grayer than it should have been. She flexed her hand into a fist and touched the affected knuckles with her free hand. She swallowed in horror to feel how rough the skin had grown, ragged, worse than the driest chap of winter.

She kept close to the house, tending to her mending with needle and thread; easy, comforting work to let her mind work out the mysteries of the day before. The ghosts were plentiful, she noted, nodding to old friends as they scampered through her garden. Some she hadn't seen in years, assuming they'd faded into whatever Underworld awaited them when their ghost time was done. Likewise, they were more affectionate than they'd been before, any lingering wariness at her humanity seemingly gone.

The next morning, Ginny awoke feeling spryer than she had in a decade. No aching hips, no arthritis in her hands. She hummed as she got out of bed. Crim trilled a few sharp notes and pecked at the hard, gray patch of scale on her hand. "It's nothing to worry about, just a bit of bark. Besides, the arthritis

in that hand hasn't ached since it showed up. I haven't felt this good in years."

The bird flashed its scarlet epaulets at her. "Oh, and what am I supposed to do, visit the doctor and tell them that now I'm so far past the so-called bloom of life, I'm going full tree? They'd lock me up and then where would you be?"

Crim fluttered to a branch perch she'd set up for him and shat on the floor. Ginny sighed. "They don't allow humans to keep wild birds as pets in this part of the world. There'd be no sense explaining to them that you're my best friend, not a pet. Humans don't see things the way we do." She sighed. "Though if something does happen to me, promise me you'll find a nice marsh and settle down in some cattails or whatever."

The blackbird angrily flashed its red again. "Just because you're not interested in mating doesn't mean that marshes don't have a steady supply of blackflies for you to eat. I'd like to know you'll take care of yourself if something happens to me."

She reached for her battered wide-brimmed hat, pulling it down over her hair. Something crunched, snapped, and dug into her scalp with a sharp pain. Ginny pulled the hat back off and cast a sheepish grin to Crim. "Don't let me forget to wash my hair tonight."

She collected firewood that morning: fierce, hard work that sweat out her worries and made good use of her vigor. First her pile of broken branches grew tall, then small and stacked in neatish rows. Steadier,

though tired, she napped well when she was finished and woke refreshed.

Shadows skirted the edges of the forest as she sat down to puzzle at the leshy's antlers. She turned them over in her hands, inspecting them close for the flaw that still eluded her. The weaving of the antlers was precise. She wouldn't be able to separate them without causing damage. More so, they wove in such a way she could hardly find where one began and the other ended, let alone where the bone might have attached to the leshy's skull.

It seemed a dreadful thing to be called upon to aid such a creature as the leshy and have nothing to show for oneself. Ginny slipped into the melancholy of that thought deeper than she should have.

Crim scolded her for it when he noticed, insisting she stop obsessing over the antlers and pay attention to him instead. He sang a few notes and tugged her hair until she whistled them back, an old game of theirs.

"Silly little bird, you're a good friend to me," she said, offering him a few seeds. For a little while, she felt herself again.

By bedtime the scales had spread past her elbow. In lieu of skin cream, she rubbed honey onto the rough spots, not relishing the stickiness. "Moon's full," she said aloud to Crim, stepping out to see the silver-laden forest. He chirped from a perch upon a deer skull, but stayed inside. The night belonged to owls.

The last of Ginny's foreboding slipped away in the silver light. She closed her eyes and opened her arms

wide to invite the moon into her soul. The orb's brightness penetrated her shut eyelids, blood red and bold. Ginny smiled, feeling cleansed and wild again, lowering her arms and opening her eyes.

Before her stood the dryad who had been guarding over the leshy's bones. Ginny froze, fighting against the instinct to run, focusing on the dryad's face. Her eyes were set to the side rather than the front. Predator's eyes faced front. This was no predator, Ginny assured herself willing her heart calm.

Three more dryads stepping out of the forest, their eyes on the leshy's circlet of antlers still sitting on her garden table. So too, were little ghosts, old friends, skittering through the forest.

"I'm sorry it's taking me so long to help the leshy find peace from pain. With the other animals it's easier for me to pinpoint what killed them. The leshy is so very different, made up of so many different creatures, it's like a puzzle I haven't solved yet."

The dryad straightened and turned to her, black eyes reflecting the silver light of the waxing moon. "You have misunderstood, witch of the woods. The leshy did not come to you to ease their death. They have simply moved onto their next form. They came to you because you are to become the forest guardian in their stead. You are to become leshy."

Ginny snorted. Her old self battled with the logic of the woman she'd become in the forest. This was preposterous, the stuff of fairy stories. Like ghost animals with broken bones in need of mending. Like the very existence of leshys walking around with her

own broken ulna. Like dryads talking to her in the moonlight.

"This is the mantle of the leshy," said the dryad, leaning over to smile at the cocoon spun into the antlers.

"But why would the forest want me? I'm old. I'm frail."

"You have all the strength of the forest inside you." The dryad turned the full force of her smile onto Ginny, her teeth startling to see amid her tree-like visage. The dryad reached for Ginny's barked-up hand and caressed it gently. "Your metamorphosis has already begun."

Moonlight sparkled on the leaves of the forest's canopy, and overhead a satellite twinkled. "I'm afraid." As soon as the words left Ginny's mouth, the animal ghosts who had kept their distance crept closer, eyes steady on her. They'd been afraid too, when they first came to her, struggling to leave their old forms behind.

Crim dashed from the safety of the cabin and tweeted a long string of notes that seemed like panic to Ginny's ears. He tugged at her hair with his beak, coiling it around his head as if to hide.

The dryad watched him with her strange, unblinking stare. "She need not leave you behind, songbird. A leshy is friend to all wild things. Her metamorphosis will not change the bond you share, no more than your own death would keep your spirit from perching on her shoulder."

Ginny rubbed the down beneath Crim's neck lovingly and he calmed. "Silly old bird."

It would be nice to talk this over with Maya, but Ginny already knew what she'd say, bits of their old conversations coming back to her. "Gram, you're not washing your hands of climate change!" If Ginny could make a difference, any difference at all, Maya would want her to try. "I'm excited to see your second form as a formidable nature warrior." Ginny remembered what she herself had said about pockets. Pockets where something might survive.

One of the cocoons on the crown shifted, catching Ginny's eye, the silk tearing away from within. A moth pulled itself from its tattered brown shelter, its wings beginning to unfold as hemolymph reached them. The wings were tinged a pale green, pulling a sigh from Ginny's lips. She'd long loved Luna moths.

The moth remained still, focused on becoming. It probably wasn't thinking or clouding its mind with complications like Ginny. Her gaze flicked to the bark overtaking her arm. She should stand aside and let herself Become. What did worrying help, after all, and when did time ever pass faster for worrying?

The Luna's final form was small for a Luna, likely female, her wings fresh and unmarred by the accidents that would surely come, her hind wingtips ready to confuse her predators, her purpose set. It would go easier on Ginny to let go and trust the process. None of this made any sense, of course, from a human standpoint. In fact, Ginny acknowledged that if she thought about this too much, she would most likely wind up discussing all of this with a therapist and no one else. But she wasn't operating within the human world now and she hadn't been for

a long time. She scratched at the bark on her arm. Neither was she entirely human anymore. She had felt herself shifting since she came to the forest. The magic with the bones was just the beginning, a change begun long before the mantle had come to her. Time was already unspooling from its careful twelve notches, shifting into swaths of waning moons and seasons.

The pulse of the forest slowed her own, the small things in the leaf litter stopped hiding away, and she developed a sense of scale that included mountain ranges and felt the sting of salt from an ocean she could not see. The dryads were ever close, watching. Ginny accepted their presence as she once accepted the ghosts, their strangeness wearing off with familiarity.

With each scale of bark that covered up her skin, another hurt faded. It had been a long while since the arthritis in her knuckles ached to warn that rain was coming. With every twig replacing a follicle of hair, some old shame fell from the memories that haunted her sleepless nights, devoured by its own inconsequence and finally, finally forgotten.

And it wasn't just the bark anymore. The spot on her shoulder where Crim liked to perch and sing his merry little tune into her ear had gotten surprisingly downy. She reached for it, unbuttoning her shirt and pulling it over her shoulder, wishing that she had a mirror somewhere in the place to better see what was happening there. Reaching with cautious fingers, she touched the affected shoulder. Soft, black down, like the top of Crim's head when she petted him, and

beneath that something harder, not bone but–she pulled back her hand and yanked her shirt back over her shoulder. Feather stalks. It had felt like feather stalks.

She gripped the wooden edge of her bed frame with her unaffected, still human, arm to steady herself. As she did so, she heard her skin crackle. She took a deep breath and forced herself to look. The whole arm had gone to bark, and as she stared, a small twig poked out from what had been her forearm, quickly forming a bud in a beam of sunlight from the cabin's window that trembled once then burst into a cheery leaf.

Her back straightened and lengthened a little every day, until she had to stoop to enter her cabin and the twigs of her hair knocked the bones of her old friends from their places in the rafters. Soon it was easier to stay outside, watching the little path to the human roads, the leaves that grew along her body nibbling at the nourishing sunlight. Rains came, but all they did was wash her leaves clean of dust and quench her thirst. She stopped noticing any heat or cold, and only knew her moods by the rumbling in her throat. She daydreamed the lives of the forest animals. She knew the panicked heartbeat of a mouse in the leaf litter, the wonderful heat of a sunny rock on the belly of snake, the tickle of wind between a bird's feathers, the weight of antlers upon a buck's head.

The dryads remained, waiting for her to abandon this place, this old life. Crim stayed steady on her shoulder as he always did, and Ginny knew he wasn't

going anywhere. Still, she waited, even as her mind blurred of her human thoughts and she struggled to remember why.

At last, a crunch of tire on the gravel and a closing car door announced the time had come. Ginny pulled her head up to stare down the little path until Maya came into view.

The woman froze when she saw Ginny, dropping her bag of goodies. When Ginny opened her mouth to speak her words came out garbled, her throat too changed for human speech and she stopped. She had not expected this.

Maya, meanwhile, appeared frozen, the look on her face painfully reminiscent of the expression Ginny had felt on her face when her husband lost his temper. Ginny had never meant to frighten her so, she just wanted to say goodbye, to let her know that she'd found her way to help the ailing world, that she'd found her second form at last.

Crim trilled and flew from Ginny's shoulder to the girl's, perching as he'd always done. "Crim?" asked Maya, turning to Ginny with a furrowed brow. Confusion, disbelief, and wonder were all visible on her face. "Gran?"

Ginny nodded, hearing a crunch of shifted bark and the shush of her leaves protesting the alien movement. Maya's eyes grew wide with wonder. "Wow, so you're some sort of leshy now?" She touched Ginny's branching hand, a smile starting slow on her face. "You're a forest guardian." She squeezed and some of the bark where her fingers touched Ginny turned to flesh again, if only for a

moment. Maya's eyes filled with tears. "Take me with you?"

No, the forest answered. Maya was not one of them, not yet. Ginny shook her head. She reached into the forest she was made of, searching for the stream that ran through the fox's ravine. Finding it, she willed a small stream of tears from her eyes to show regret.

Maya's hand tightened on Ginny's. "Please, Gran. I want to help."

Ginny closed her eyes and dug for a piece of her human self, finding her voice deep in some old memory. "No, love. It's not time for your second form, not yet. Come find me then and we'll make magic of the world."

Maya grinned through her tears and nodded. "I will."

Ginny reached for the leshy's mantle at last, pulling it onto her head. It fit as comfortably as any winter toque she'd worn in her former lives. The human part of herself faded further and her leshy aspects strengthened, muscles tightening and strategies strange and wild hatching in her mind as she contemplated the threats to her forest and how they would adapt. A song trilled in her ears, not just Crim's, but the forest's, the soil and trees and plants, singing a melody heady with longing, grief, strength, patience, and the wisdom of having lived through many, many forms before this one.

JENNIFER SHELBY

Jennifer Shelby rummages for stories through the beetled undergrowth of fairy infested forests. She forages for them in the dark space between stars. To find out more about these stories, you can visit her at her website jennifershelby.blog or find her on tiktok as @jennifershelby35.

Q&A with Jennifer Shelby

The following questions were posed by Catherine Yeates, author of *The Scholar of the Journeying Archive*, and are answered by Jennifer Shelby about their story *The Second Form of Ginny Elder*.

This was a lovely story with rich worldbuilding and a beautiful character arc. It really made me feel something. I liked how Ginny was able to care for the ghosts of the forest. What inspired the emphasis on bones?

> Thank you! I adore Ginny's character, so it's wonderful to hear someone else cares about her, too. I suppose the emphasis on bones comes from my own morbid curiosity about the parts of us we leave behind and how attached we are to those part.

I wished I could visit the forest in this story. I feel like I get my best ideas out in nature. Does nature play a role in your writing process?

> Absolutely! I grew up in the woods, a childhood that I chronicled in my middle-grade book *The Incredibly Truthful Diary of Nature Girl* (I write kidlit as J. D. Shelby), and these days I live in a house nestled deep in the forest with my own family. Most of my stories are inspired by something I saw in the woods or some feeling that I got from looking at a forest scene. The woods can surround us with such comforting elements of magic and wonder and I try to tap into that when I'm writing.

I enjoy stories that focus on transformation as a subject of wonder rather than horror. I found the tone of this story very comforting, and I loved the incorporation of folklore. How did you get interested in the folklore of the leshy?

> I've always been interested in folklore, even as a child. I remember being a kid in my school library and coming across the mention of a Leshy in a book and being very frustrated that there wasn't more lore and stories about them that I could devour, I mean, a shapeshifting forest guardian, that's an amazing supernatural creature for a kid who loves the woods.
>
> Then, a few years ago, I was cross stitching a Leshy pattern by an artist named "The Witchy Stitcher." Cross stitch is a very slow, meditative

process, and it can take months to finish a project, so Leshy lore was very much in my mind. I had a meaningful encounter with a red-winged blackbird around the same time, so I altered the bird in the pattern into a red-winged blackbird. Once I named him Crim, I knew there was a Ginny, but it took me a long while and some deep dives into Leshy lore to understand her transformation.

If you lived in the world of this story, what do you think your role would be? Would you live in the forest?

I can definitely see myself growing into a hermit crone in the woods one day. But if I had the choice, I'd love to shapeshift into Crim. I could join Ginny on her Leshy adventures and then turn back into me when the forest is quiet and write them all down to share them with the world.

Primeval

Katherine B. Randall

The day the world changed started out ordinary. It was Friday, and no one was paying attention in class. I leaned my elbow on the desk and watched spring raindrops hit the thick glass of the window next to me, then stream down in tiny rivers. Ms. Honeywell was gamely trying to get us to focus on History of Science and Magic—a new combined class—but her heart wasn't in it.

"Does anyone know when magic stopped being taught in US schools? Anyone? Any volunteers? Naomi?"

I turned my face away from the window and my attention back to last night's assigned reading. At least it was short. "During the Cold War," I said. "It was already old-fashioned before that, but in the 50's, they dropped it so students could focus more on science and math."

"Thank you, Naomi. And why was it already falling out of fashion?" Ms. Honeywell stepped

forward and wrote *Magic Lessons Discontinued in Public Education–1954* in her large, loopy handwriting across the whiteboard.

"Because science and technology are more reliable, and everyone can learn them, but only a few people can use magic," I parroted. I knew she didn't care what I really thought.

"Thank you. Do you have anything to add, Justin?" Ms. Honeywell pushed her gray-brown hair wearily back from her face. She was fighting a losing battle to keep Justin awake until the bell rang.

I turned and caught Raya's eye at the back of the classroom, and we shared a secret smile.

Me and Raya met the first week of sixth grade, here on an island off the coast of Oregon. We were both new. Dad and Papa and I moved here for their work, the same as her parents. Dad is an ecologist, and Papa is a geologist, and Raya's mom and dad are climatologists. So they all started talking about their research right there at the school gates. It's not like it was a special connection or anything—almost all the adults on the island work at the same climate study facility. There's nothing else here except for houses and trees and the school.

Raya hung back a bit from her parents, looking as bored as I felt. She was fidgeting with her long, dark hair, flicking her single braid forward over one shoulder and then the other. She sized me up with big dark eyes, and I shifted from foot to foot.

"I love your jacket," she said softly, like it was a secret. "Are those lupines?"

"Yes!" I said. "I sewed them on." I ran one finger self-consciously over the purple flower patches—she'd even known what they were called. "I like your sneakers." They were bright yellow, with aqua blue laces.

"Thanks." Her smile lit up her whole face.

By the time the bell rang for us to go in, we'd covered all the important stuff: favorite flower, favorite ice cream flavor, siblings (none for me, two brothers for her), least favorite school subject, and how many schools we'd been to before (five for me, three for her).

After we got to know each other better we talked about it. My dads kept moving for their research, same as her parents, and trying to convince me that each new place would be better than the last. Each move was supposed to be a fresh start, a brand-new adventure, a big step forward. Instead, each first day of school was different-but-the-same. Each classroom had mean kids and bored kids and kids who were friendly but not friends. Each house had a new bedroom for me to read the same books and lie under the same quilt, thinking new thoughts.

Raya understood. Raya and I agreed that change was usually a circle, or a spiral—you came back around to where you'd been before, or somewhere similar, only you'd changed in the meantime. We came up with the spiral theory of change in the back of math class, my head bent over her notebook while she sketched out the shapes.

But sometime after that math class, a few things did change. Really change, not just different-but-the-same.

Raya brought it up first, during a winter sleepover, in the middle of the night. She was in her sleeping bag on the floor by my bed. We were lying in the dark. "Sometimes," she said, "I can tell things without seeing or hearing them. Since we moved here." Her voice was so quiet I could barely hear it.

"I know what you mean," I whispered back. "Sometimes it's like the forest is talking. Not talking, exactly, it's like—not words, it's just—"

"Just knowing what's around the bend before you see it. Knowing where the animals are, or where there's a creek, or—"

"Or when it's about to start raining, or where the lightning will hit."

"Exactly!"

That was our secret: that the old-fashioned superstitious magic we barely talked about was still alive in both of us.

Little kids always play at being magicians, but they're supposed to grow out of it—like playing with dolls. Instead we took it seriously, and agreed not to tell anyone else. We spent all our free time in the woods, practicing what we could know before we saw it: the presence of deer or squirrels or tiny chipmunks, salmon in the stream, old boulders that

had sat in their places for centuries but still remembered volcanic heat.

And the trees. The trees told us we were welcome, even though we were new here. I'm not sure if they meant because we'd just moved to town, or because we're not indigenous, or because we're only human. The first trees evolved more than three hundred million years ago—I looked it up—and homo sapiens only showed up three hundred thousand years ago, at most.

It turned out trees had longer memories than we realized, and the trees around us were complaining nonstop. Even up in the protected land above the school they weren't happy. They were drinking tainted groundwater, growing in polluted soil. They grumbled that the rainwater soaking in around their roots wasn't right. They knew as well as my dads that the world they were growing in wasn't the same as it had been before, though they couldn't quantify it with microns of plastic per liter of water. They wanted the old world back, and the longer we listened to them the more we wanted it too, Raya and me.

My dads and Raya's parents and Ms. Honeywell and pretty much everyone at the facility agreed that climate change was a problem, the kind of change that isn't progress, the kind of change we should stop. But nobody agreed on how. So me and Raya asked the trees. Then we went looking for some very old books, books about magic.

Raya found one called *Memory Magic and the Past* that looked useful. It was a reprint of a reprint of a

book of spells from the fifteen hundreds, before the Enlightenment that Ms. Honeywell liked to remind us was "the end of the rule of superstition."

A month ago, when me and Raya tried a spell from the book for the first time, it was just a little one. *To Borrow the Memory of an Object*, the page said. It didn't seem so different from what we were doing already, reaching out to the landscape around us. We went down to the shore instead of up into the woods, one chilly rainy Sunday when no one else was around. We sat down on the biggest black boulder we could find and I held an umbrella over the open book.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready."

We read out the words, alternating lines, because we'd had our first big fight over who got to read out the spell and this was the best compromise we could manage.

It wasn't the same as reaching out to the forest without a spell. It was like the difference between hearing somebody tell you a story and doing the thing you'll tell stories about later. I was the boulder; I was ancient and unmoving, but I was also sweeping across the landscape as a flow of burning lava, like a seabird flying or the tide coming in.

It felt like the spell that was over in a moment, but the sun was setting and my legs were stiff. Raya could barely walk. We limped our way back to my house for dinner and pretended we'd lost track of time playing hide and seek.

We decided that next time we'd try something bigger.

I looked back at Raya, on the day the world changed, and we shared a secret smile. Then the bell rang, completing the circle of the school day, and everybody rushed for the door. Me and Raya met in front of the building the way we always did. Our bikes were chained side by side. Hers was a light blue that I envied every time I looked at it, and mine was a boring black. We turned left out of the parking lot, away from the town.

My legs burned as I followed her up and up and up. The road changed from slick pavement to muddy dirt halfway up the hill. All of the houses were in the other direction, clustered between the research facility and the bridge to the mainland. Up here was protected land, mostly forest. The wind wasn't cold at all once I got moving, and I pulled the hood of my raincoat off so I could feel the gentle rain soak into my hair and trickle down my face.

As we pedaled I reached out into the forest around us, and I knew that Raya was doing the same thing. The first time I tried reaching out to the woods while riding my bike I fell off, but I'd gotten a lot better at it with some practice. I could keep my legs moving in a steady rhythm on autopilot, my hands firm on the handlebars, while my thoughts drifted to the pace of a tree growing—slow, slow, slow.

The book was there in my backpack as we pedaled our way up the hill. I listed the names of the trees that Papa taught me as we passed them: Douglas fir and red alder and ponderosa pine and white oak and black cottonwood, the names rolling through my mind without me having to take my eyes off the road. I could identify them by feel. I'd been practicing.

When we got to the top of the hill we dropped our bikes in the wet grass and headed for our favorite spot, me with my backpack and the book. The rain had stopped. We waded and pushed our way through huge ferns as tall as me, detouring around tangled bushes, and stopped right at the sharpest edge of the hill. This part of the island was what's called an old-growth forest—the trees here had never been cut. We could see the spread of the hillside below us, the stretch of the road, the school and the first houses way down below. The ground under my feet was soft with wet pine needles, my sneakers sinking into their give, and I breathed in their smell and grinned at Raya.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

I pulled out a waterproof camping blanket I'd brought from the garage, and we hunkered down on it as I opened the book.

Raya and I leaned in together, under the cover of the largest fir tree we could find, and started to read out the spell, alternating lines the way we'd done last time. I stuttered a little at first. I didn't know what all the words meant or if I was saying them right. I

only knew what they were supposed to do. I felt jittery under my skin.

I felt the tree above us start to notice, the way that a deer will flick its ears and turn its head at the littlest sound, deciding whether to move. Then the other nearby trees started to notice, too, and with them the soil and the water and the air. It was intimidating.

The words started to feel heavy in my mouth and my jaw ached. I could tell that Raya felt it too. She started to stumble and slur some of the syllables. During each of her lines I rubbed at my jaw, took deep breaths, and tried to focus on our purpose.

The trees were still listening. They didn't understand words, so I kept images in my mind as I read: a memory of the past. A memory of when the whole island looked like this small part, before any trees were cut, before any houses were built, before roads, before changes to the soil and the water and the air. "Change is a circle", I told the trees, but they already knew. Each year made a circle inside them.

It got harder and harder to talk. I grabbed Raya's hand, which was shaking. She held on fiercely, and I felt a surge of pride. "We can do this", I thought. It's what we'd said to each other when we found the book, when we read what this spell was for. *To return an area to its past form, by memory and will.* We didn't want to bring the forest all the way back, back to the volcanic eruptions the boulders remembered, or back before trees began to grow. Just back a few centuries, before the industrial revolution. We could take it that far.

Raya read the next-to-last-line of the spell and I looked down at the last. Was I sure about this?

Ms. Honeywell said that magic was bad because it was exclusionary. Not many people could learn to use magic, and the people who did have a talent for it all used it in different ways. Technology, she said, was predictable and logical and available for everyone. The scientific method was the best way of answering our questions about the world. But when I repeated what she said to Dad, he laughed and called it "a layperson's oversimplification," which is the kind of thing he says when he doesn't want to tell me flat-out that a teacher is wrong. And maybe magic wasn't something that everyone could use, but it was something I could use. It was something we could use to change the world.

I forced the last words out into the air. A wave of dizziness rolled through me.

Not just me. I felt it before I saw it: a change rolling through the forest. The trees around us shivered in the wind, and then the shivering motion took over the entire hill below us. New trees started growing right up through the road.

I fought to keep my eyes open as the change kept moving, from where we were sitting to the very edge of what I could see. The trees below were alive with movement, centuries of growth in a moment, expanding on fast-forward till they reached taller that the telephone poles, tall enough to touch the sky. One of the phone lines snagged and snapped. The roof of the school building down below us was split through with leaves and branches. The paved road

down to town was cracked and covered, waving with ferns.

"It worked," Raya whispered next to me.

"I knew it," I said. "I knew it would."

I was tired, fighting my own muscles to stand, but it was time to go home. The bikes were so well covered in bushes and ferns we couldn't even find them, so we had to walk. I hadn't expected that. It was time to see how far our spell had gone.

As it turned out, our spell went all the way to the edges of the island. The rain started again when we were halfway down the hill. By the time we got to the bottom we were both soaked through in spite of our coats. We stopped at the same corner as always, where Raya would head left towards her house and I would continue straight almost to the bridge, the one that connected our island to the mainland. We didn't say anything special: I didn't know what to say that could possibly live up to the cracked road, the living green smell all around us, the trees leaning over us like friendly skyscrapers and sighing in relief as they drank up untainted water from the changed ground. Instead I bumped Raya with my shoulder and we grinned smugly at each other, too cool for words, and parted ways.

The next two weeks in the reborn forest, in our half-ruined house, were almost perfect. Dad and Papa and me weren't evacuated in the first rush because our backup generator still worked. Only one of the

trees grew straight through our house. It loomed through what used to be the formal dining room, and Dad nailed that door shut and tacked boards across it while Papa climbed up to the roof and covered the hole as best as he could with an old blue tarp and duct tape. I climbed a different tree outside my bedroom window and watched him work, but he couldn't see me through the layers of leaves. That Friday we lit the candles before dinner and sang together, something we hadn't done since I was little. It was nice.

Raya and her mom and dad evacuated that first night, because her house now lacked both power and plumbing. The tree roots ripped right through the main sewer line to her house, so the whole block stank. I didn't even get to hug her goodbye before they all disappeared to a hotel on the mainland, and, a few days later, to a whole new town.

There was no reception anymore to message her, so I started writing a letter in bits and pieces to send later. Curled up in my room, I updated her on the new-old forest. "It misses you. We miss you." I'd known that the spell would change the world, but I never thought that one of us would have to go while the other one stayed. "It's not fair. As soon as we leave the island, I'm calling you."

My dads weren't sure what had happened, though everyone still left on the island agreed that magic must have had something to do with it. "Whoever did this wasn't thinking," Dad said at lunch the second day, sitting at the narrow kitchen table. "With the power lines going down like that, they could have

started a fire. It's just luck that no one was seriously hurt. Or maybe they didn't care." Papa put a hand on his arm and glanced over at me, which meant *stop getting so mad in front of Naomi.*

It was true. We didn't think of that. We knew that houses would get wrecked, and maybe the road, but we didn't really think about the people. "I'm glad the spell worked", I wrote to Raya that night, defensively. "I'm glad we did it. But maybe we shouldn't try it anywhere else."

I knew the that invisible changes we made here were the big ones—no pollution in the air or the water or the soil. At some point soon the scientists would figure it out too, and maybe they'd understand better.

It wouldn't last, of course. Even on an island, pollution would arrive from other places, but it wouldn't go back to the way it had been for a long, long time.

There were a lot of things my dads couldn't see, and that was what hurt the most. I wanted to tell them this was for the best, even though they hated it, even though they didn't want the world to change. It's what they told me each time we moved for their research, each time I started at a new school, each time I was upset. This is all for the best. Change is part of life. But I knew they wouldn't hear me if I said it now.

When the two weeks were up, Dad got a call that said it was our turn to evacuate. The research facility was closing for a long time, maybe for good. I thought they'd just move it somewhere new, but I

guess it was more complicated than that. Papa nodded at him and gathered me into his arms. We were moving to Aunt Amy's place for now, and after that, no one knew.

When Papa was done hugging me I went outside into the yard. I scrunched my eyes shut and felt the rain falling, the trees rustling, the breeze off the ocean bringing them to life. This was my last chance to feel it for a long time—but a long time for a person is nothing to a tree.

I don't mind leaving because I know the truth: when I'm older I'll come right back here, back to this forest. And then I'll be home for good.

KATHERINE B. RANDALL

Katherine B. Randall grew up in Brooklyn and currently lives in Philadelphia with her wife and an overflowing collection of books. She is a freelance editor by day and a writer of speculative fiction and YA Fantasy by night. She received her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, and you can find her online at kbrandall.com.

Q&A with Katherine B. Randall

The following questions were posed by Adriana C. Grigore, author of *Sea Cures for the Previously Cursed*, and are answered by Katherine B. Randall about their story *Primeval*.

I loved your story! I liked the focus on change and the fact that, in the end, the biggest change wasn't something that pushed the setting forward into the future, but back to the past. Change really is a cycle! Does this mirror your writing process, or is it more linear? Do you start from the idea, the characters, or the setting?

> Thank you! All of my stories tend to start with setting. This one came from a dream image of looking across the water at an island and seeing the trees on the island grow wildly, snapping telephone wires. The first draft of the story wasn't linear at all, because I was trying to figure out who the main character was and how

she had set off this change and how she felt about it and what would happen next, all at once. It took me several messy drafts to turn the image into a story that made sense.

There is, at least on the surface, a clear dichotomy between science and magic in this story, yet in the end they are both used for the same purpose of healing part of the world. Do you consider them as two sides of the same coin, so one can't focus on them at the same time, or do you think magic and science (and what they represent) could coexist in balance?

I never thought of this as a magic-versus-science story, but rather a story about blind spots and different ways of approaching the world. The adults in the story have blind spots about the nature of change and the unimportance of magic. Naomi has her own blind spots, so sure of what she and Raya are doing that she doesn't think through the consequences. You could say that magic in this story stands for creativity, or individual talent, or traditional knowledge. I do think that different kinds of knowledge and curiosity can coexist and work together.

I feel like oftentimes it's elders who appear to heed superstitions the most, but like you've shown here, children are very prone to it too (cycles again!). What was your favourite bit of superstition growing up?

I always had a lot of fun making wishes as a kid! I came up with my own rules about wishes that

I added on to what I was told. Eyelash wishes were only for small things. Dandelion wishes were meant to be spontaneous—I could only wish for the very first thing I thought of, or it wouldn't work. Birthday candle wishes were the most powerful and could last for the whole year. If a wish didn't come true it didn't mean that making wishes didn't work, just that I had to try again later.

Every Room Is a Crowded Room

By Emily Yu

When I was a baby, my parents thought there was something wrong with my vision. They found me staring past them, reaching my chubby fingers to empty air, or giggling the way I would when someone played with me, except that there was no one else there.

I was swept off to be assessed by the optometrist as soon as possible. All my tests came back perfect even though I cried at the appointment. The optometrist thought I was upset by the yellow eyedrops that made everything blurry, but it was because he didn't notice the scary woman behind him with the long black hair. Once I learned how to talk, my parents suspected that there was nothing wrong with my eyes, but perhaps my brain.

When I was four years old, my dad sat down with me for a pretend-tea party. I put out a cup for me, a

cup for him, and a cup for all of the people who followed him. There were five teacups in total and a toy nursing bottle for the baby.

He raised an eyebrow as he examined the set-up. "Are these for your imaginary friends, Cassie?"

"No," I said as I dealt out plastic scones to each saucer. "They're for yours."

"My friends?" He pointed to the bottle. "And one of them is a baby?"

I nodded and gestured to the guest in question. "Can't you see him?"

My dad's brow furrowed and he shook his head—no.

"He's tiny and all wrapped up in a white blankie with yellow flowers." I frowned as I dug around my toy chest for the sugar bowl. "He's always sleeping. I wanted him to wake up for the party."

The colour drained from my dad's face, the toy cup slipped from his grip. He was a good father for the way that he pretended that nothing was wrong. Looking back now, a lesser man would have broken down and cried if his young daughter perfectly described the stillborn son that he'd held years before. His hands remembered the shape of his infant's body, warm with his recent exit from the womb, bundled in that floral blanket as his parents sobbed over a life that never was.

I went to a psychiatrist who reassured my parents that visual hallucinations were relatively common in

children. The walls of her office were bright and colourful, adorned with rainbows and cartoon animals. I was surrounded by plush toys that smelled like a mixture of staleness and disinfectant as I sunk into the bean bag chair.

There were two kinds of people in my world—those who looked and felt solid like the psychiatrist and my parents. They interacted with me, and I could touch them. The other people looked different: a little bit see-through as if they were superimposed on to life like a double exposure photograph. There were always more of these see-through people than the solid ones. Most of them ignored me but some nodded in quiet acknowledgement if I stared for too long.

Very occasionally, one would talk to me. There was once a translucent lady in the mall who reached her trembling fingers towards me, distress bright in her eyes. I couldn't do anything because the solid man that she was tethered to was walking quickly in the opposite direction, and she had to follow him. That seemed to be the rule with this second version of people: they were never without the first. The solid person was their anchor, and these spectres were bound to them like shadows, reflections in a mirror that didn't match.

The psychiatrist didn't know what to do with what I described, looking more and more perplexed as she jotted down her notes. She asked me several times if I was sad or if anything bad had happened to me, if anyone had hit me or touched me in a way that I didn't like. My answers were always no, which

seemed to leave her more confused. I attended follow-up appointments with her, but those fell away because I was a happy kid—well behaved with a loving family that included my parents and their ghosts. Social workers came to evaluate our household, and my parents passed with flying colours. My Catholic grandparents convinced my parents to get me baptised. I hated it, my nose burning from the water that I wasn't supposed to inhale. It didn't work. Nothing changed my visions except that I stopped talking about them, and then everyone pretended they had gone away.

It didn't take long for me to realize that nobody else could see these ghosts, and I quickly learned not to tell anybody about what I saw. These translucent people remained a mystery to me until I was well into my late teenage years. Initially, I thought they were angels or ghosts of people who had died and hadn't moved on, like Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*. The tiny baby that my dad had been spooked to hear about was my older brother who was born fully formed and perfect but remained blue and breathless in his arms. A separate version of his ghost followed my mom as well, so it didn't make sense to me how one baby could produce two spirits.

It soon became clear that these spirits weren't only those of the deceased. My aunt's ghost was my grandma, who was still alive, but a younger version of her that was always angry and constantly berating my aunt for her mistakes. I was the only one who could see or hear this ghost of my grandma, but my aunt had always been a self-deprecatory person for as long

as I'd known her. It made me think that perhaps these ghosts were people who made us sad, and that we could be haunted by people even if they weren't gone from the world.

When I met my friend Gheorghe's dad, one of his ghosts was himself, and I had to rethink my hypothesis. The ghost version of himself was different—skinnier with long-hair, a paint-stained smock, and a cheerful demeanour that contrasted his normally stoic face. I learned later that he had always wanted to be an artist, a dream he gave up when he started his family. These spectres were much more than people we missed or our childhood bullies. Instead of being the spirits of the dead who couldn't let go, they were the burdens of life that we couldn't put down no matter how hard we tried.

I always wondered if I had any ghosts that haunted me—any regrets, forgotten dreams, or past loves. There were no memories that consistently echoed in my consciousness. I couldn't see my own ghosts, not next to me or behind me or in the mirror. At first, I thought that I didn't have any, but as I grew into adulthood, there was no way that that was the case. Young children rarely had ghosts; people seemed to accumulate them the older they got, until they became so old that the ghosts gradually faded as their bad memories did. That realization came when I visited my grandmother at her nursing home where

some of the residents wandered the halls with contented blank smiles and no one behind them.

On my way home from work one day, I took the shortcut through the park like I usually did, and I almost walked through a little ghost girl. She was crying. The park was deserted at this time of the evening, and I did a double take. I'd never seen a ghost without a tether, without a human mind to conjure them into existence.

I crouched down to her level. "Are you lost?"

"Everyone's making fun of me," she sniffled without acknowledging my question. "They're scared of me."

"Why?"

"I'm different. I can see people that aren't there."

My first thought was that she was my own ghost—I'd finally encountered one of my own. A longer look at her quickly contradicted that idea, because she didn't look at all like me. I was mixed race of Chinese and Scottish, whereas she was clearly Arab. My hand went right through her when I tried to touch her, so I ran my fingers along the outline of her arm hoping that she could find some comfort in the illusion of the gesture alone. "I'm different too."

"Can you see them?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"The ghosts?" she confirmed.

I nodded again.

"Can we be friends?" Her eyes widened. "My name is Aisha."

"Of course, Aisha. I'm Cassie."

Despite being able to see them my whole life, I wasn't sure how to be friends with a ghost, much less the ghost of a child. It gave me a weird swooping feeling in my gut to know that there was, or once was, another person in the world who might be the same as me. For once in my life, I felt less alone. I took Aisha home to my studio apartment. She didn't seem to mind that she couldn't consume the snacks or drinks that I had to offer; she seemed content just to walk around and examine my belongings.

"Aisha, can you see my ghosts?" I asked as I prepared dinner for myself.

"Yes, but it's harder to see them without her," she said as she tilted her head to examine the abstract painting on my wall. The dim lighting in my apartment made her look more transparent than she'd been outside.

"Without who?"

"The now-me."

The spoon slipped from my hand, clattering to the floor. That meant that present-day Aisha wasn't dead—there was a real version of her walking around at this very moment who could see my ghosts. It would be impossible to find her, and I didn't know how old she'd be today or if she was in this city.

I rushed to her, reaching out to take her shoulders until I remembered that I couldn't touch her. "Do you know where I can find her? How did you get separated?"

"She—" Aisha's voice faded as the image of her grew even fainter, and it wasn't the lighting—she was disappearing before my eyes.

"Aisha!" I reached out but my body slipped through hers and she was gone.

Sometimes I thought I dreamt her up. I'd been alone with my ability for my entire life and I'd rarely felt lonely, and now that I'd met Aisha, I found myself longing for the company of someone else who understood. It gave me hope that if there was one other, then maybe there were more of us.

My eyes wandered every time I was in a new place, wondering if I could recognize Aisha's soft brown eyes at a different age. She could be ten years old, or she could be a hundred and ten. I had no idea what I was looking for. And I tried not to focus on the way that her form dissolved into air, because I didn't know if that meant the real person that she was tied to was gone as well.

Every room with at least one person in it was a crowded room to me, because every person brought with them anywhere from three to ten ghosts, sometimes more. For those with many, the number of ghosts weighed down on them, and I wondered if sorrow and regret were part of the human condition, that we chose to burden ourselves because letting go hurt more.

I hadn't paid attention to the mass of ghosts in the crowded café; I was trying my best not to run into

real people as I nodded apologetically at the ghosts that I walked through. When I was about to take a step forward in the slow-moving line, something pulled me back.

My heart sped up as I saw the familiar form of little ghost Aisha who was talking quickly and animatedly, flailing her diaphanous arms in wild gestures and looking much more opaque than she had been last time I saw her. She laughed as if in response to a joke, and I noticed that she didn't seem to be talking to anyone at all.

I whispered, "Aisha?"

She looked up at me, and her face split into a wide grin.

"Who are you talking to?" I tried to keep my voice low as I hoped none of the other patrons would notice me seemingly talking to myself.

"Your ghost," said Aisha.

"Mine ...?"

There were too many things to unpack. Aisha was here, which meant that her person wasn't dead and might also be here. I had ghosts that I couldn't see. She was talking to my ghost. She was laughing and being friendly with my ghost. Someone could see my ghosts. Someone could understand me.

Warm hands gripped my shoulders as I realized that I felt faint.

"Hey, are you alright?" A woman with a heart-shaped face gently guided me until the backs of my knees made contact with the chair behind me and I sat down. She knelt in front of me, and I knew her kind brown eyes. Aisha's eyes.

"Yeah ..." I said.

"Breathe." She emphasized a big inhale and I followed suit. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I almost choked. She said it with a twinkle in her eye like it was an inside joke to herself, and I burst out laughing. Her sculpted eyebrows rose high on her forehead. I had no idea how to introduce myself to this girl that I'd been hoping existed for my entire life. She was beautiful, and now she certainly thought I was a maniac. The ghost version of her younger self giggled at me from behind her.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to compose myself. "I'm Cassie. This is going to sound crazy, but I met your ghost a few months ago."

"My ghost?" she said.

I nodded, swallowing down a lump of anxiety as I wondered if maybe I had gotten it wrong; maybe she wasn't like me at all and I'd just admitted my secret to a total stranger.

Before I could retract my words, she said, "You can see them?"

I nodded again, hope threatening to rise in my chest.

"I never knew if I had them or not." Something next to me caught her attention, and I knew without a doubt that she was looking at my ghost. She said, "What's my ghost like?"

"The one that I met ... is you, as a child. She feels alone, like no one in the world understands her." I met young ghost Aisha's eyes, and she gave me a sad smile. There were a few other ghosts alongside her

too, and I hoped for the opportunity to learn each of their stories one day.

"You have one like that too," she said, glancing back at the space next to me. "I had temporary amnesia after a concussion a few months ago, so I wonder if that's how you met her without meeting me. I'm Aisha."

"I know."

She smiled and took my hand, helping me to my feet. Our hands fit perfectly together, a warm mixture of golden and brown skin. Her eyes held mine, and after a lifetime of thinking I was the only one who could see, I was finally seen.

EMILY YU

Emily Yu (she/they) is an Assistant Editor and Illustrator for *Heartlines Spec* magazine and a contributing author to a bestselling book anthology titled *Landed: Transformative Stories of Canadian Immigrant Women*. Her work has been published in *Ricepaper* magazine, and her short stories were selected for the Humainologie Short Story Festival in 2021 and 2022. She is a second-generation Chinese Canadian who apologizes when she breaks grammar rules. Follow her on Mastodon @emily_writes@wandering.shop.

Q&A with Emily Yu

The following questions were posed by Sarah Jackson, author of *Perfect Weather*, and are answered by Emily Yu about their story *Every Room Is a Crowded Room.*

When did you first get the idea? Did anything in particular spark it? What arrived first? (eg a character, a phrase, an image?)

> I had been looking at some writing prompts for inspiration and I came across one that was along the lines of "write about a character who can see ghosts." I'm sure the intention of the prompt was to write a horror story, but I'm not very good at those, so my attempt grew into this story instead.

How did you feel when you were writing it? How do you feel about it now?

I really enjoyed writing this story! While I was writing it, I thought often about Maclaren's quote: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Everyone has moments in their lives that may have affected them more deeply than we realize, so it was fun to figure out how I could translate that into something perceivable. Looking back now, as I'm sure many writers do, I can see the parts that could be polished up or changed up a bit. Overall, I still love the concept!

Can you tell us one detail you know about the protagonist, Cassie, that isn't in the story?

Cassie's really bad at sports. In school gym class and during her brief stint trying soccer as a child, she found it hard to navigate between the real people and the ghost people. As an adult, she likes going to fitness classes where it's easier to mind her own space.

Do you have a favorite ghost story?

A bit cliche, but I love *The Sixth Sense* (I'm also a big Bruce Willis fan).

Between the Storms

A. P. Howell

The storm spun up quickly. One minute the sky was filled with a ragged collection of clouds, scraped across a blueish canvas by a desultory painter. The next, the sky had gone green and thick, oily clouds had boiled up, blocking the watery sunlight.

Zheryl was wasting time better spent studying, but she wasn't a fool. The weather forecast had called for a storm sweeping in from the west sometime in the afternoon or evening. The morning, however, was *supposed* to have stayed clear. For all that meteorology was a science, there was still a lot of art and luck involved. They only had a few decades of data for the planet, along with a wealth of assumptions and inferences based upon weather patterns many light years away.

You did your best to be cautious and make good decisions. When that didn't work, you ran for cover.

The lock on the nearest bunker was engaged. She hit the knocker out of politeness, and the person

inside opened the door. (Zheryl had never needed to disengage a lock from outside, which was good because spending a couple hours holed up with the sort of person who wouldn't immediately open the door sounded miserable.) She muttered her thanks and clambered down the ladder.

When the door shut above her, she realized just how loud the wind had gotten. She could still hear it inside, a scream turned to a whistle. She felt a shiver of belated, reflexive fear. If she'd set out later in the morning, or lingered at the shrine too long ...

Only one person waited inside, another adolescent girl. She couldn't have arrived much before Zheryl. Her hair was windblown and she hadn't yet removed any of the leaves or twigs that had become tangled in it. The effect was a bit hilarious, not that Zheryl could laugh. Her braids had probably held up better than whatever hairstyle her companion'd had at the start of the day, but she was sure there was plenty of dirt and debris to comb out later.

"I'm Caie." The girl wore a formerly-white top and a pair of vintage pants, wide-legged and mid-calf. Vintage *style*, Zheryl amended, but probably new: the color palette was recently popular. When she moved, the bells at the hem tinkled.

"Zheryl." Zheryl settled herself into one of the molded plastic chairs. It wasn't very comfortable, but it saved her from wondering about what might have nested in a cushion. (It didn't happen often, but it happened. A new rodent-type species had been discovered that way last year.)

"Did you have the brilliant idea to go to the shrine, too?"

Zheryl smiled. "Better than test prep. Are you from Flanders?"

Caie nodded. "The shrine in town is always mobbed this time of year."

Flanders was a little closer to the shrine than Zheryl's town, but if she remembered the map correctly Caie would've taken the Red trail instead of the Blue, which was a more challenging hike. Caie was wearing the right boots for it, even though her outfit really needed a pair of sandals.

Since the bunker was in a designated "wild area"—there were marked trails, but no paving or leveling—it was one of the small, basic models, lacking ramps or braille or much in the way of amenities. There were some instrument readings displayed on a screen, plus a simple red/green light to indicate if outside conditions were safe or unsafe. It didn't look like anybody had done maintenance for a while. A couple of the lights were out. Bunkers either smelled of musty neglect or disinfectant; this one fell into the former category.

"The comms don't seem to be working," Caie said. She began finger-combing her hair, though even Zheryl could tell that wasn't going to go well. "My parents must be freaking out."

"Mine, too," Zheryl lied. They certainly *would* be upset when they found out she'd ditched studying in favor of the much less time-sensitive task of making an offering. And it hadn't even been a blood lily or silver acorn or anything in any way related to

scholarship or professional development. No, in the midst of test prep she'd placed a honey orange at the shrine.

She didn't even have anybody in mind—which was, of course, part of the problem for an adolescent living in one of the small towns on a planet still approaching the centennial of human habitation. The enormous balls and careful matchmaking and fish-out-of-water scenarios of the past (well, of past media) just didn't happen. There wasn't room. Towns were too small; the entire human population was too small. The planet was too big. Ecological contamination protocols were still in force.

Zheryl probably wouldn't leave the province before she was an adult—if she happened to have a compelling professional reason for travel, or bonuses that unlocked tourism and exploration options. (All the more reason to study.) She'd probably spend her life on the same continent where she was born. That was a small pool from which to draw future friends and lovers—small enough to drive one to despair. (Particularly if you'd been watching a lot of romances lately, on top of some interesting hormonal fluctuations.) Nudging the odds with a honey orange left at a shrine seemed the most practical reaction. And visiting a shrine outside of town sidestepped the embarrassment Zheryl knew she'd feel if her status as available-and-looking became widely known.

So much for a secret offering. Once people heard where she'd sheltered (and everyone gossiped about where they'd sheltered) it would be obvious she'd visited the shrine. Maybe she could pretend she *had*

left a silver acorn. It wasn't lying if she just happened to mention that silver acorns littered the Blue trail and let her parents and friends draw their own conclusions.

"I was totally going to study tonight," Caie said with a conspiratorial smile.

"Third year?"

Caie nodded. Her fingers snagged in a knot and she sighed, giving up for the moment. "Some days I really want to shave it all off. But I think my head's shaped weird."

"It looks fine to me." Not that Zheryl could tell under the mass of hair. But sisterhood came with obligations; she couldn't do anything about the storm, but she could maybe bolster somebody else's self-confidence.

Caie just shrugged, and Zheryl wondered how often she'd contemplated, and then discarded, the head-shaving plan.

"I need to do well on biochem," Zheryl despaired. "It's my strongest science *and* it's a nexus field, so if it goes down I can't just switch to bio or something. And if I try doing something abstract"—as if her mathematics proficiencies supported that—"or even jump tracks to humanities"—as if that could sustain her interest—"it's still so late—"

"Too late," Caie affirmed grimly. "Until you hit a mid-career crisis and do something completely different."

"Only the people with really impressive accomplishments get away with that," Zheryl said. "If you don't get poached, you're just ... well, like my

aunt." Her aunt was smart. She had a solid professional track record of nearly thirty years as a chemist. And the past ten years had been pretty good, too—there was something to be said for mature learners taking a pragmatic approach to new fields—but she wasn't judged by the same standards as someone just starting out. She'd become a non-genius dilettante, and Zheryl had overheard her confessing that she often wished she'd just settled for staying a chemist.

"Sorry," Zheryl said.

"It's okay. It's good to vent sometimes."

Zheryl didn't vent. She knew she'd just sound ungrateful or flighty or undisciplined. Her parents would (silently) judge her. Friends could commiserate, but only on the most superficial level: they were all smarter and scoring better, or else embraced less prestigious interests and marginal career goals.

But a stranger? Someone who didn't know her already, who she wouldn't randomly run into between classes? A stranger was the perfect repository for her anxiety, and she didn't mind returning the favor.

"I don't have a chance of doing well on ... well, on anything," Caie said. "Everybody thought the meds would help, and we keep tweaking them, but ..."

Zheryl nodded in second-hand sympathy. She didn't need scripts herself, but plenty of people did, and dosage had been a bit of a nightmare for a couple of her friends.

"It's not like that's the only problem," Caie said quickly. On a sparsely-populated world, taking responsibility for your actions was as important as pulling your own weight—and all the more important if you *couldn't* pull your own weight. "It just makes all the others worse."

There wasn't much to say to that, but Zheryl tried to come up with something anyway. In the silence, she noticed that the noise from the wind had died down. "Maybe we will get a chance to be diligent this afternoon."

Caie turned around to check the more detailed data on the screen under the red light, then shook her head. "Another one's coming through pretty soon. It looks like they're chaining."

Zheryl groaned. Chained storms were the worst. Instead of sweeping west-to-east they sometimes did a little dance and hung around. The two of them were going to be here *forever*. With no comms. And who knew if any of her personal tracking data had synced up, and whether her parents would be able to access it to get an idea of her probable location and likely safety? They'd be so relieved to see her when she got home, but after the initial rush of happiness about her not being dead, they'd probably insist that she keep from going *anywhere* on her own during storm watches. Which wouldn't be so bad except storm watches were pretty much the default state on this continent ...

Her stomach growled. Perfect. She hadn't brought snacks, and given the state of the bunker she really didn't want to sample the rations.

"Here," Caie said, reaching into one of her enormous pockets to retrieve a honey orange. "Since I'm not doing anything else with this today."

Zheryl just stared at it for a moment. "I thought you were going to make an offering about studying. Or maybe meds or something."

"Yeah, that'd be the sensible thing, right?" Caie said sheepishly.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean—" Zheryl took the fruit and split its skin with her fingernails. It smelled glorious—Caie hadn't skimped, she'd picked a perfectly ripe one—and the viscous juice left a sticky smear on her fingertips. She held half the fruit out to Caie. "I did the same thing. My honey orange is up at the shrine."

Caie was silent for a moment. Then she took the fruit and smiled.

Maybe chained storms weren't that bad after all.

"Well, it was at the shrine," Caie said. "It's probably blown halfway to the river by now."

Zheryl smiled back and took a delicate bit of honey orange. Outside, for just a moment, the wind died down and all was right with the world.

A. P. HOWELL

A. P. Howell lives with her spouse, two kids, and a pair of rambunctious pups. Her short fiction has recently appeared in The Cosmic Background, Underland Arcana, ParSec, Bicycles & Broomsticks (Elly Blue Publishing) and Darkness Blooms (The Dread Machine). You can find her on Mastodon (wandering.shop/@aphowell) or her website (aphowell.com).

Q&A with A. P. Howell

The following questions were posed by Akis Linardos, author of *Seven Flavors of the Seven Winds*, and are answered by A. P. Howell about their story *Between the Storms*.

There's something that really resonated in this piece. How Zheryl chose to vent her academic stress on a stranger as she was too fearful to share with loved ones because she fears their judgment more. More importantly though, those close to us often fail to understand our personal career journey. Are such academic and interpersonal complexities themes you commonly explore? What inspired this particular piece?

> Planets that are unfriendly to human habitation (while improbably clocking in with gravity, atmospheres, and biomes similar to Earth) are a staple of science fiction. I like the idea of playing with the people caught in between—in

> this case, a generation that's removed from the initial excitement and danger of exploring the complete unknown, but just live in this new environment. As most teenagers will utter to their parents at some point, they didn't ask to be born; they didn't ask to be born here; and they're just a cross-section of humanity, not a specially-trained and selected exploration team.

Slice of life stories seem to follow different patterns than the typical plot-driven tale. Did this change your typical writing process? How did the seed bloom into a full story in this case?

> This piece started as the prompt for a flash fiction contest. I put it aside when it was clear I wasn't going to finish it over the weekend, then picked it up again because I wanted a story for a submission call on positive queer futures. The setting is positive in a lot of offhand ways—queer-friendly, the implication of little crime and inclusive architectural design, no apparent concerns about money or the availability of health care—but nothing's perfect. Exploring that gap between "good" and "not perfect" is what interested me.

I had a look at your background and noticed that like me, you usually write dark stuff and horror. Is it common for you to take a break from the haunted tales for something as wholesome as this? Does it let the demons rest a bit in the background of your subconscious to come out stronger?

It's not a conscious break, but my brain may nudge me in more pleasant directions when needed. I'm usually only working on one thing at a time, so whatever the mood is for a given story, that's the mood until I'm done with it (or until it's abandoned or back-burnered). I sometimes write specifically for interesting submission calls, and that can set the subject matter and tone.

I feel like the dark stuff is ... I don't want to say representative of the default human condition. Humans are amazing and contain multitudes, and the wholesome stuff doesn't feel any less authentic. But the planet's on fire, fascism is up, plague is endemic, and war crimes are a dime a dozen, so any horrific fiction I write ends up feeling depressingly realistic.

There's something that really piqued my interest in this story. Career anxiety is something I increasingly associate with our population growing denser, making things more competitive as there are more people to compete with. Here you mention these characters seem to live in a sparsely populated planet and yet the career anxieties are just as powerful. Why do you think that is? How do you imagine such environmental factors come into play regarding work stress?

I see the competition as coming from a more practical place. On a recently settled planet with a small population, there would still be a need for a lot of backbone-of-society type stuff:

medicine, research, infrastructure, and so on. Those fields require specialized training—and a lot of resources invested in that training.

With more limited resources and no real emphasis on money, career prestige is about the value you bring to society. The flip side of "we're all in this together" is "pull your own weight." Failure isn't just personal; you're also failing the society that supports you. There may not be tangible losses (housing, food, medical care, and other necessities will be offered) but the tangible gains (e.g. the ability to travel) will be out of reach, and so will the less tangible prestige factor. Humans will always find a way to create hierarchies.

Talking about career stress, I'll close with one generic question: how do you balance this mad-hard career against the mountain of adulthood responsibilities?

Poorly? The past few years have been rough on my household for a lot of reasons, and my Long Covid fatigue has made that even worse. (Fortunately, my spouse has a full time job and insurance.) At this point priority one is highly variable child needs, priority two is sometimes making progress on also variable part-time self-employment stuff. Writing is a hobby, not a side gig, and happens when I can rub two brain cells together. I haven't been as effective at finding and using that time as I'd like (did I mention the ADHD brain? Yeah, that makes scheduling productive spurts even tougher). I'm also trying

to think of ways to diversify my writing output. That's partially because I have some longer stuff I'd like to finish up, and partially because so many short fiction markets are distressed (largely knock-on effects of Amazon and Twitter policies).

Colophon

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